SWIFT AND SURE

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Title: Swift and Sure

Author: Herbert Strang

Release Date: March 14, 2012 [EBook #39151]

Language: English

Character set encoding: UTF-8

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IN THE NICK OF TIME

SWIFT AND SURE

The Story of a Hydroplane

By

HERBERT STRANG

Author of 'King of the Air,' 'Barclay of the Guides,' etc., etc.

ILLUSTRATED BY J. FINNEMORE

LONDON
HENRY FROWDE
HODDER AND STOUGHTON
1910

RICHARD CLAY AND SONS, LIMITED,
BREAD STREET HILL, E.C., AND
BUNGAY, SUFFOLK.

PREFACE

Exactly a century has passed since the French invasion of Spain gave the signal for a general revolt of the Spanish-American Colonies. In the twenty years' struggle that ensued, Spain paid in kind for more than three centuries of Colonial misrule. Her garrisons, again and again reinforced from the mother country, fought a losing fight, with the old-time Spanish gallantry that had won for Ferdinand the Empire of the West. But the tide of freedom swept them remorselessly from one province after another, and with them went the swarms of corrupt officials who since the days of Cortes and Pizarro had plundered the colonies for the benefit of the Spanish treasury.

In the northern provinces the leading spirit of revolt was Simon Bolivar, a man whose many faults of character were obscured by an extraordinary energy and enthusiasm. He is said to have fought four hundred battles; his victories were sullied by inhuman barbarities; his defeats were retrieved by unconquerable perseverance. Bolivar was instrumental in founding five republics, among them that of his native province of Venezuela, of which he was the first President.

Ten years of one of the grimmest struggles known to history gave freedom to Venezuela and her sister republics; but in the north, as in many other parts of the Continent, freedom has for the past century spelt, not liberty, but licence. Centuries of slavery, in fact if not in name, had rendered the mixed races of South America unfit for self-government. The mass of the people merely exchanged one set of corrupt rulers for another; the history of the South American Republics has been for the most part a chronicle of incessant civil war between the partisans of rival dictators. Venezuela has in this respect one of the saddest records. Since Bolivar, her first liberator, died in exile eighty years ago, she has enjoyed scarcely five consecutive years of peace. Although blessed with boundless natural resources, the country is probably the most backward of all states that can claim a place among civilized nations. The population of Venezuela is believed to be less at the present time than during the Spanish domination; and it is doubtful whether the condition of the people has been sensibly bettered by a hundred years of self-government.

The best hope for this and other South American republics seems to be in the gradual opening up of the Continent by the capital and enterprise of more progressive communities. This movement has hitherto been checked by the insecurity of life and property due to constantly recurring revolutions. But sooner or later trade and commerce, one of the greatest of civilizing agencies, must bring the nations of South America into such close relationship with Europe and the United States that they cannot fail to recognize the value of stable political institutions. This recognition will be the first step towards what the wars of independence

should have given, but did not give them--liberty.

HERBERT STRANG.

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CHAPTER I--JAGUAR AND HYDROPLANE

The level rays of the early sun were struggling with the mist that lingered upon a broad full river, like a sluggard loth to quit his bed. As yet the contest was unequal, for the banks of the stream were covered with trees and shrubs, crowding upon one another as if in competition for elbow-room, through whose thick ravelled foliage the sunbeams could not clear a way. Here and there, however, the dense screen was parted by little alleys or open spaces carpeted with grass or moss, and through these a golden radiance shone, dispersing the mist, and throwing a glistening pathway across the river.

At one such glade, withdrawn a little from the brink, stood a jaguar, which, from moment to moment, lifted its head and gave utterance to a roar. It faced the stream: its tail lashed its flanks, to the annoyance of countless flies which would fain have found a temporary lodgment in its sleek and glossy coat. It roared, and roared again, with curious persistence, for the mere pleasure of roaring, an observer might have thought. And yet such a person, had he been worthy of the

name observer, would have detected a reason for this strange behaviour. Had he watched the surface of the water opposite to where the jaguar stood, he would have marked a gradual assembling of greenish-yellow objects, scaly and hard; and, set in each, two glassy leering eyes. They were in fact the snouts of alligators, or caymans as they are known in Venezuela.

Moment by moment the assemblage increased, the hideous creatures gaping at the jaguar like an enraptured audience at a popular baritone. The quadruped, indeed, was executing his solo for their amusement, though hardly for their benefit. One could have fancied, as the audience grew, that he derived encouragement from their presence, and exerted himself with ever greater abandon. The performance, however, came to an end surprisingly abrupt. Suddenly the roarer turned his head up-stream and set off with lolloping gait along a winding track that led among the trees. The observer, following him, would have seen him force his way through the undergrowth, now leaping a fallen trunk that lay across his path, now pressing his body through a tangle that might have seemed impenetrable.

Meanwhile the caymans also had turned upstream, and swam after the jaguar, like an idle crowd following at the heels of a street singer. But though their movements were rapid, they had to stem the current, and the object of their solicitation drew away from them. Nor did he stop to practise his vocal powers again. Steadily he pursued his way until he had left them a mile or more behind. Then, compelled to strike off to the left by a peculiarly dense mass of thorn, he quitted the brink of the stream for a few yards. Coming upon it again through a glade, he looked warily about him, advancing with slow and stealthy tread. It was at this spot that he purposed to cross the river. All at once he stopped short, and sinking to the ground, lay motionless, scarcely distinguishable from the jungle around him, so closely did his colouring harmonize with it. In a few moments, with the silent undulating movement of a cat stalking a bird, he crept forward. No caymans were near; having attracted them by his vocalization he had left them in the lurch, and was content. But on a branch of a tree overhanging the river he had spied the form of a dark-skinned man stretched at full length. The hunted was now the hunter. The reptiles had lost their victim; he in his turn was intent on seizing his prey.

The man lay close upon the branch, his eyes fixed upon some object on the farther bank, a little distance up-stream. The tree being rooted in the base of the bank, which here rose a few yards above the river, the jaguar was somewhat higher than the man, stretched all unsuspecting upon a lower bough. Noiselessly, without so much as a rustle, the animal glided down the face of the bank, and coming to the tree, began to climb up the slanting trunk behind his destined victim. No ear could have detected his furtive movements; the man's attention was absorbed by the object of his gaze; yet, when the beast was only a few feet from

him, some instinct warned him of impending danger. He turned his head, and beheld the savage creature crouching for a spring. Quick as thought, the man rolled himself round the branch, and dropped with a heavy splash into the river. The jaguar was already launched in air when the man let go his hold, but instead of striking his prey, he lighted on the vacant branch. The force of his spring was too great to be checked by the grip of his claws upon the bark. He lost his footing, and fell plump into the water where it still eddied from the plunge of the man.

A hundred yards up the river, moored to a tree-stump in the further bank, lay a motor-boat of unusual shape. Its only occupant, a young white man, in the act of casting off, had looked up when he heard the first splash. Before he could see what had caused it, the jaguar tumbled headlong from the branch. With the instinct of a sportsman, the young man instantly stretched his hand towards the rifle that lay at his side, only to draw it back as he remembered that the charge was small shot. The head of the jaguar appeared above the surface; the white man wondered what had caused the first splash, but seeing the animal swimming downstream he was not specially interested, and was on the point of lifting his mooring-rope on board when he suddenly caught sight of a black head on the surface, a little beyond the jaguar. It was the head of a man swimming desperately towards the nearer bank.

Will Pentelow was interested enough now. The jaguar also had seen the swimming man, and with a low snarl started in pursuit. There was little chance of the swimmer gaining the bank before the beast. Even if he did, it would merely be to fall a prey. Flinging the rope into the bottom of the boat, Will pressed the lever. The little vessel started, and, assisted by a four-knot current, rapidly gathered way. But the man and the jaguar were also helped by the current, though they were swimming diagonally across the stream. They were so near to each other now that Will doubted whether, at the full speed of the engine, he could overtake them in time to intervene. If he fired, the spreading of the shot would injure the man as well as the beast. Our observer would certainly have concluded that the swimmer was doomed.

Suddenly, however, the boat shot forward with marvellous velocity. The bow, or rather the platform at the forepart, rose clean out of the water, and the vessel seemed to skim along the surface. Fast as the jaguar was overhauling the man, the vessel was still faster closing in upon the jaguar. Will steered straight upon the tawny head. The boat appeared to fly along.

Hitherto the jaguar had been so intent upon his victim as to be oblivious of all else. Even the whirring of the propeller had not struck upon his senses. But when no more than three yards separated him from the man, he became suddenly aware that he in his turn was pursued. He turned half round, to see a rushing monster almost upon him. In another instant there was a heavy thud; the boat

quivered from stem to stern, but with no perceptible slackening of speed passed clean over the spot where the animal had been.

A few moments more, and the hydroplane was floating on the water like an ordinary boat. Looking back, Will saw the swimmer scramble up the bank. Almost opposite him was the jaguar's head, bobbing up and down on the surface. The impact of the vessel had broken the creature's back. Immediately the Indian caught sight of it, he rushed along the bank in pursuit. The animal disappeared, but emerged again a few yards lower down. Then the man drew a knife from his belt, and plunged into the river. A few strokes brought him level with the carcase, and catching it by the ear, he drew it after him to the bank.

Meanwhile Will Pentelow had turned his vessel round, and, driving her against the current, came opposite to the Indian just as he reached the bank. The ground was steep and slippery, and the man was unable to drag the huge body out of the water. Will glanced all round with a caution born of familiarity with this haunt of caymans; but reflecting that the hydroplane would have scared away any of the dread reptiles that might have been lurking near, he threw out an anchor, and waded to the assistance of the Indian. Together they heaved the carcase out of the water and threw it on the bank. Then they looked at each other.

CHAPTER II--THE HACIENDA

William Pentelow was one of those boys who make up their mind early what they are going to be, and work steadily towards this settled aim. The son of a professional man of moderate income, he was sent to a well-known London day-school, showed no special promise for a year or two, but after his first lesson in mechanics declared that he must be an engineer, and from that time made rapid progress in science. His father recognized his bent, and sent him to the Heriot Watt College, where he was thrown among young fellows of many different nationalities, a circumstance that had two results: it caused him to think for the first time of going abroad, and it gave him opportunities of picking up a certain knowledge of foreign tongues. With French and Spanish he was soon at home; German bothered him; he was making strides in Hindostani when a sudden offer launched him on his career.

A friend of his father was superintending the building of a railway in Venezuela, for a British company engaged in working asphalt mines. Originally they had sent their products by barge along a tributary of the Orinoco, down that great river itself, and thus to sea. But after the company had been in existence for some years, the Jefe of the province of Guayana, by indirect means in which the South American official is an adept, secured a monopoly of the navigation of the tributary in question, and at once levied exorbitant transit dues on the only people who used it as a commercial waterway--the asphalt company.

The directors put up with this extortion for a time. Then the accession of a new president drove matters to a climax. This President, unlike almost every other ruler of Venezuela from the time of Bolivar, aimed, not at enriching himself and his clique, but at purifying the public life of the country. One of his first administrative acts was to dismiss the Jefe of Guayana, a notoriously corrupt official, who immediately set about making good his loss of income by doubling his fees to the asphalt company. This was more than the Company could stand. The directors made a vigorous protest to Government, but the Jefe was acting strictly within his legal rights, and there was no redress. The upshot was that the Company obtained a concession for a branch railway line, to run from their mines, along the right bank of the Jefe's river, to a junction with the trunk line about fifty miles distant. The work was immediately put in hand; the services of Mr. Pentelow's friend, Mr. George Jackson, were engaged as chief of the construction staff; and just before sailing, Mr. Jackson bethought himself of young Pentelow, now near the end of his pupilage, and offered him his first job. Will accepted with alacrity. The opportunity of gaining experience and at the same time seeing a foreign country was too good to be neglected. He sailed with Mr. Jackson, and had been several months in Venezuela when our story opens. Forty miles of the railway had already been completed, and was in use for the carriage of asphalt, this being conveyed to railhead from the mines on mules. The Company had ceased to pay dues to the ex-Jefe of Guayana, whose monopoly was now not worth an old song.

Will's only regret in leaving England was the interruption of his hobby. He had been for some time enthusiastically interested in motor-boats, and when Mr. Jackson's sudden offer came, was in the midst of experimenting with a hydroplane. This he had to leave behind. But he had not been long in Venezuela before he found an opportunity of taking up his hobby again. The labourers on the railway, a strangely assorted crowd of Spaniards, Spanish-Indians, Indo-negroes and other mongrels, were scrupulous in one matter: the observance of holidays. Saints' days and festivals were numerous, and on these all work stopped. Finding himself thus with plenty of spare time on his hands, Will turned it to account. In Caracas one day he picked up a petrol engine, very light and at the same time of considerable

horse-power. It was part of a motor-car which a wealthy Venezuelan had imported from New York. One break-down after another, imperfectly repaired--for the Venezuelans are notoriously bad mechanicians--had disgusted the owner of the car, who was glad to sell it for a mere trifle. Since the car was useless outside Caracas--and indeed inside the city, for the matter of that, the paving of the streets being remarkably primitive--Will removed the engine, conveyed it to the head-quarters of the branch railway, and with the assistance of a handy man on the staff, by name Joe Ruggles, adapted it to a hydroplane which he built himself. The basin of the Orinoco is so much intersected by rivers and streams of all sizes that the new railway was at no point very far from a watercourse deep enough to float the vessel. The constantly recurring fête days gave Will many opportunities of indulging his hobby, on which he was the object of much good-humoured banter among his colleagues.

The boat, as Will had to confess, was a somewhat rough and ready affair. It was not the kind of thing that would be turned out at Thorneycroft's, and it would no doubt have been regarded with a sniff of contempt by a professional boat-builder. In its essentials it was a kind of punt, the flat bottom being fitted with planes inclined at an angle, so that when the propelling force was sufficient, the forward part of the boat was raised out of the water, skimming along the surface instead of cutting through it like an ordinary boat. The crew and engines were accommodated aft, this disposition of the weight facilitating the skimming action on which the speed of the vessel depended. Although some twenty-four feet long and eight feet in beam, her draft at rest was only a few inches. As Ruggles was accustomed to say, she could go anywhere if the dew was heavy enough. For the hull Will used a light steel framework covered with very thin planking. A boat-shaped windscreen, pierced for two ventilators intended to cool the engines, gave shelter to the crew, a very necessary precaution when the boat was moving at high speed.

Will's principal difficulty lay in converting his engine to this new use. The driving shaft he found answered admirably as a propeller shaft, the bevel wheels he melted in a crucible to form a propeller. The latter he had to cast himself, making a pattern, moulding it in sand, and pouring the melted brass into the mould.

The petrol was stored in a tank accommodated under the back seat. Will found that some twelve gallons gave him a speed of about forty knots for a four hours' run, which was quite enough for any ordinary expedition.

For a hundred and fifty miles above Ciudad Bolivar, Will soon knew most of the principal tributaries of the Orinoco. In fact the only limit to his expeditions lay in the capacity of his petrol tank, but even this he could supplement on occasion by taking with him a number of extra cans. He had of course one or

two exciting experiences; these were inevitable in navigating tropical rivers at a speed of forty knots. More than once the blades of his propeller were injured by half-submerged logs. After tinkering at them some hours on the bank of a creek or river, he would return at four knots to the place from which he had started at forty. These, however, were merely exhilarating incidents; they lent just that spice of risk that made the sport thoroughly enjoyable.

Such risks were due to great speed, but there were occasions when in this very speed lay safety from disaster. One day, having a longer holiday than usual, Will ran down nearly to the mouth of the Orinoco. While going easy at some twenty knots he saw what looked like a bank of water stretching right across the river ahead of him. It did not need a second glance for him to recognize that a tidal wave was sweeping up the river, and threatening to engulf him within a few moments. Before he could bring the hydroplane round, the mass of water, moving at tremendous speed, was almost upon him. He had perhaps five seconds to spare, and drove the hydroplane at its hardest. For a moment it seemed to him that the issue hung in doubt, a very unpleasant moment, as he afterwards confessed. Then the vessel began to draw away, and the immediate danger was over. But for ten or fifteen miles he thought it wise to keep a respectful distance between himself and the tidal wave, which followed him, although at a gradually diminishing speed. Since then he had avoided the Orinoco itself, and limited his excursions to the tributaries within easy distance of the advancing railway.

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We left Will on the bank of the river, the Indian before him, the dead jaguar at his feet. The Indian glanced at his rescuer with a timid, hunted look; then, as if reassured, began to thank him in harsh imperfect Spanish. Will had perceived at once that the man was not one of the workers on the railway.

"Where do you come from?" he asked.

The hunted look returned to the man's eyes. He glanced nervously up and down the river, and towards the opposite bank. Lifting his hand, he described a half-circle with it in the air.

"But where is your home?" Will asked again.

"I have no home, señor," muttered the Indian. "It was burnt with fire."

"How was that?"

The man hesitated, then mumbled something which Will failed to catch. Evidently he was suspicious, and did not wish to be communicative. Will noticed scars on the upper part of his body; and from other slight indications, as well as the man's manifest nervousness, guessed that he was a fugitive.

"Well, you had better go," he said, "and keep out of the way of tigers. Here,

take this beast if it's any good to you."

"It is yours, señor," said the man, surprised.

"I don't want it; you may have it."

He had seen that the animal's skin was ruined by the impact of the hydroplane. The Indian, however, was delighted with the gift; the claws would be valuable to him. He thanked Will with servile effusiveness, and stooped to the animal. Will stood watching him for a few moments, then got into his vessel and started it down-stream, increasing the speed until it reached at least thirty knots. In about a quarter of an hour he came to a tributary entering the river on the right bank. He had already slowed down, and steering the vessel round, he made his way up the smaller stream. In parts it was very narrow, and so closely overhung by trees on both banks that Will more than once had to bend to avoid the branches. Here and there the stream was shallow; but the hydroplane drew so little water that she was nowhere in danger of running aground.

Following its winding course for some two miles, Will came to a straight canal scarcely twenty feet broad, running into the stream on the left. He steered his vessel into this, and arrived in a few minutes at a small lake. On the further shore, some feet above the water-level, stood a fine hacienda--a sort of superior bungalow--surrounded by luxurious gardens. It was a long, broad dwelling of one storey, with verandas, the door, which was open, leading through a light hall into the patio--a spacious court, with a flowerbed in the centre, on which all the rooms of the house opened. Below, at the foot of a terrace, a small jetty projected into the lake. Will steered the hydroplane to this, and moored her beside a diminutive sailing yacht that already lay there. Then he made his way towards the house, giving a loud coo-ee.

He was half-way to the door when a young man, a few years older than himself, came to meet him. He was dressed in white drill, with a brilliant sash or cummerbund about his waist, a white sombrero on his head, and a long cigarro in his mouth.

"Hullo, old chap!" he said, with a scarcely noticeable accent. "I wondered when you would come again. I was just thinking of coffee: come along!"

He linked his arm with Will's, and led him towards the house.

"I say, can you lend me some slippers? I can't appear before the ladies like this."

Will glanced down at his long boots, which had dried green after their immersion.

"Don't worry, my dear boy, I'm alone: the ladies aren't here."

Will looked disappointed rather than relieved. The two went together into the patio; a servant placed chairs for them at a little round table, upon which coffee, bread, cheese, and fruit had already been laid.

"Yes," continued Antonio de Mello, speaking now in Spanish, "I thought I had better send my mother and sister away. There's a storm brewing."

"A revolution?"

"Undoubtedly a revolution, my friend. The President has made an enemy of every villain in the country, and General Carabaño, who is as big a rascal as Venezuela has ever known--and that's saying a good deal--is beginning to make things lively."

"In Caracas?"

"No, not yet. He has raised his flag about fifty miles from here, and if he can get a big enough army together he'll make for the capital and try to overthrow the Government. And I tell you, my friend, there's trouble ahead for your railway. Carabaño is hand in glove with the late Jefe, who doesn't love your Company."

"But why did you think it necessary to send the ladies away?"

"Because Carabaño is a particularly offensive person. He has an old grudge against me, and if the railway brings him in this direction, he will not be able to deny himself the pleasure of a visit. I do not care that my mother and sister should meet him; nor shall I meet him myself if I can avoid it. I have made arrangements for a hasty departure if I hear that he is in the neighbourhood.... But come and see my new stables. They're finished since you were here last, and I've got a new hunter you'd give your eyes for. Come along!"

Antonio de Mello was very proud of his new stables. He had lived for some time in England, whence he returned with a pretty taste in horseflesh and an ambition to start a stud. Like many of his countrymen he was a good linguist, being equally at home in English, French, and Spanish, and having some knowledge also of the native dialects of his district. He had met Will one day when riding in the neighbourhood of the railway, and struck up a friendship with him. Will had been several times to his house, where the señora and señorita had made him very welcome.

He accompanied Antonio to the stables, just completed, and duly admired their up-to-date appointments and the new hunter. He thought it a little odd that the old stables were still left standing. They were very tumbledown; indeed, an English gentleman who owned a house and gardens like the hacienda would have regarded them as an eyesore which it behoved him to remove as soon as possible. But the typical Venezuelan is not fastidious, and though Antonio had acquired some of the manners and something of the outlook of Englishmen, he still retained much of the careless and happy-go-lucky traits of the South American, and was quite content to allow his old stables to fall to pieces within a few yards of his front door.

After strolling round for half-an-hour, Will declared that it was time to be off. Antonio went down with him to the jetty; and, promising to repeat the visit

before long, Will set the hydroplane skimming down the canal until he came to the stream again. Then, turning to the left, he went on for three or four miles, until the silence of the forest was broken by a low humming sound, in which, as it grew louder, it was possible to distinguish the blows of hammers, the thuds of spades, and the shouts of men. The labourers were not in sight, being concealed by the high bank and its dense vegetation.

Bringing his vessel to a stop, Will gave a low whistle. Instantly a dark face appeared in the mass of foliage on the bank, and a negro boy, about sixteen years of age, slid down towards the brink of the stream. To him Will flung the painter; the boy caught it and, plunging back among the bushes, began to haul in, Will lying at full length on the deck. The hydroplane passed through the screen of foliage into a shallow recess in the bank, where it was completely hidden from view, either from the stream or from the ground above. Owing to the constant shifting of the camp as the railway lengthened, Will had had some trouble in finding harbourage at once secure and convenient for his vessel. The labourers were a rough lot, and though it was unlikely that any of them would have been able to work the engine, it was always possible that one of them, if feloniously inclined, or perhaps simply bent on mischief, might paddle or pole the vessel down the river, or at any rate do a good deal of damage to it. Will therefore always sought for some secret place in which he might lay it up.

The recess into which it had now been hauled was discovered a few days before. It struck Will as a very suitable place for mooring the vessel, though it cost him and the negro boy some hours of hard work to clear it of frogs and other old inhabitants. The water was only about two feet deep, so that there was little fear of encountering alligators; but it was swarming with electric eels, one of which gave Will a severe shock as he waded in with his vessel. He was very careful not to give the creatures another chance.

"Why weren't you here when I started this morning?" said Will as he made the hydroplane fast.

"Very sorry, señor," replied the boy, "but señor did not wish the place to be known. I was coming, as señor ordered, but I met Señor Machado, who walked by my side. What could I do? I walked round about, but Señor Machado kept with me a long time, and when he left me alone, and I came here, your excellency was gone."

"You did very well, José. Señor Machado is a friend of yours, eh?"

"No, señor, but very friendly."

"Ah! a distinction and a difference. He asked you questions, no doubt?"

"No, señor, no questions, but he would have liked me to give answers."

"And got none. Very well, José; always keep your mouth shut. I don't want Señor Machado or any one else to meddle with my boat."

He unscrewed the throttle and put it into his pocket. Then, having seen that the painter was securely wound about an iron stake driven into the ground, he scrambled up the bank, walked along for a few yards, shoving aside the entangling undergrowth with his arms, and came to a spot whence he could overlook the scene from which the sounds proceeded. Several hundreds of dusky labourers were engaged in constructing an embankment along the edge of a wood nearly a quarter of a mile away. To the left, the railway line disappeared among the trees. A small engine was drawing a train of trucks filled with earth towards the partly built embankment. Below this, on a stretch of sward, were the tents of the engineering staff; at a considerable distance to the left were those of the coolies. Will forced his way through the trees, remaining out of sight from the encampment, and approached the tents by a circuitous route. The sudden friendliness of Señor Machado for his boy José confirmed him in his determination to keep the whereabouts of the hydroplane a profound secret. True, Señor Machado had hitherto seemed a quiet inoffensive fellow, attentive to his duty as telegraphist; but the telegraph was not constantly in use, and Will thought it just as well to keep temptation out of Señor Machado's way.

CHAPTER III--AN ARMED PARTY

Will went to his tent, washed and changed into his working clothes, and then set off to report himself to Mr. Jackson, known among the staff as the Chief. Work had been going on since shortly after daybreak, and as a rule Will would have been in charge of a squad; but the Chief had told him the night before that he need not come on duty until ten o'clock, when he wished to see him about a special job. It was just ten when he came to Mr. Jackson, who was perched on a goods wagon, watching the jointing of the rails some distance from the encampment.

"Here you are," said the Chief, taking his watch from his pocket. "I'll say this for you, that you're punctual, in spite of your toy. Broke down yet?"

"Not yet, but I broke a jaguar down this morning: came smack on him just as he was going to get his claws into an Indian."

"Not one of our men?"

"Oh no! It was some miles from here, beyond De Mello's place. I heard a splash, and there was the jaguar, full pelt after the man, who was swimming his hardest. It was a near thing, and----"

"Yes, I dare say, but I'm not particularly anxious to get a fellow to fill your place just as you're becoming useful. Your hydroplane is all very well as a plaything for your spare time; but it's no earthly use, and I only hope it won't lead you into scrapes. A stitch in time saves nine."

Will's eyes twinkled, and the ghost of a smile played about his lips. The Chief had a habit of finishing his little speeches with a proverb, not always appropriate to the occasion.

"Well now, this job," continued Mr. Jackson. "I want you to check some calculations of level about six miles up. Here you are, on the plan: that's the section. You've been over the ground before; it's the most difficult part of the track. You can take Ruggles as rodman. You'll be some time over the job, so take some grub with you, and be as quick as you can. Time and tide waits for no man."

"Can I have the plan?"

"No. Trace a copy of the section: it won't take you twenty minutes. And, I say, make sure your level's in order; it won't do to get there and find there's a screw loose. Look before you leap, you know."

Having traced the plan of the section he was to survey, Will got his instruments (a hand-level, a surveyor's camera, and a pocket compass), his revolver, and a note-book, sent José to find Ruggles and saddle a couple of ponies, and in half-an-hour set off on his task. The country, as the Chief had said, was the worst bit of the whole line. It was much broken by hills and ravines, and the surveyor, choosing the easiest way for the iron road, had been compelled to trace out a rather tortuous course, which was indicated by stakes driven into the ground at intervals. The line would twice cross the little stream which Will had recently navigated in his hydroplane. Fortunately it was fordable at both points.

Will rode on with his companion at a steady trot. Ruggles was a sturdy grizzled veteran of about fifty years of age. He was the handy man of the staff. He could act as rodman, chainman or slopeman as circumstances required. He could build a boat, repair an engine, and cook a dinner with equal facility, and once he surprised Will by helping him out in a knotty calculation in trigonometry. It had been a source of wonder to Will that a man whose attainments were so various should have risen no higher than the humble situation he at present occupied. One day he ventured delicately to hint at the matter.

"I'll never earn more than two pound a week as long as I live," said Ruggles.

"But why? I earn more than that, and you could do my work better than I can."

"Drink--that's why. Every sixpence I earned above two pound would go in drink, and so, to be on the safe side, I'm never going to earn a penny more, that's flat."

Will could not help feeling amused at the old fellow's emphatic declaration, more especially because the man was not a teetotaller, but drank his glass of ale at dinner like the rest, and was never known to exceed. He guessed that there was some story in the background, and hoped that some day Ruggles would tell it; but the man was reserved about his own affairs, though as sociable and cheerful a man as any on the staff.

It was near midday when they reached the section Will was to level, and as the sun was high they decided to eat their lunch in the shade of the trees and begin work later. Ruggles produced bread and cheese and a bottle of beer, and when this had been disposed of, filled an enormous pipe and lay on his back contentedly puffing away, throwing out a remark occasionally. At last Will sprang up, saying they must set to work. For several hours they walked over the ground, making calculations which Will entered in his notebook, and taking photographs for after use. Will often found that such photographs when developed disclosed features of the country that had escaped notice. The ground he was now working over was very rough, and even in the few weeks that had elapsed since his predecessor visited the spot the track which had been partially cleared had become overgrown with tropical weeds. Ruggles found plenty of work for his knife and the axe he carried in his belt.

Will proved in course of time that the previous calculations had been very accurately made. In some cases he found lateral deviations of six or seven feet on a ten-degree slope; these he corrected. In one case he saw reason to suggest a slackening of grade on a curve in a long gradient; and he noted an alternative means of crossing a small stream, for the consideration of the Chief. It was tiring work, done in the heat of the sun, and both were glad when it was finished. They returned to the spot where they had left their ponies tethered to two of the surveyor's stakes, and were on the point of mounting when Ruggles drew Will's attention to a number of horsemen crossing an open space between two belts of woodland about two miles away. Will looked at them through his field-glass.

"They're coming this way, in single file. Wonder who they are," he said. "Have a look, Ruggles."

"About thirty of 'em, as near as I can count," said the man, after a long look. "I can't make anything of 'em."

"Are they muleteers?"

"No."

"Perhaps they are soldiers."

"Don't look like it. I can't see any uniform, nor rifles either. We'd better

make tracks."

"What's the hurry? I've seen nothing to be afraid of in the natives; they're a pretty poor lot so far as I have come across them."

"That's a fine healthy English way of looking ac things, but if you'd lived in this country as long as I have you'd know that when you spot such a troop in the distance the best thing you can do is to clear out--unless, that is, you have any particular wish for trouble."

"But why on earth should you suppose they're not peaceable folk--a hunting-party, perhaps?"

"Supposing's neither here nor there. Hunters don't ride in a line, without hounds. My belief is that they're brigands, and we shan't have much to say to them with one revolver between the two of us."

"They may be soldiers."

"That's only another name for brigands here. The only difference is that a soldier is a brigand in office, and a brigand is a soldier out of office. And, by Jeremy! they've got a prisoner. There's a man trotting a-foot beside one of the horses; ten to one he's tied to the stirrup. Take a look, Mr. Pentelow."

"You're right; and I can see now they've got rifles slung to their backs. They're making a bee-line this way. What's their game, I wonder?"

"Shouldn't be surprised if they've paid a visit to the mines, to begin with."

"I think I've got it," said Will, the recollection of what Antonio de Mello had said flashing across his mind. "There's a revolution brewing: these fellows are either Government troops or rebels. We had better get back and tell the Chief."

"I said so five minutes ago, if you recollect, Mr. Pentelow. In this country there are always plots against the Government, whether it's good, bad, or indifferent--and it's mostly bad. Revolution is always on the simmer, you may say, and every few years it boils over. It's the curse of the country. Any big job like this railway of ours is like sitting on a powder-barrel: any moment you may be blown sky high, in a manner of speaking. If Government don't interfere with you, then Revolutionists will; and I'll lay ten to one those horsemen are one or the other, beating up recruits. They haven't seen us yet or they'd be coming faster, so we had better slip in among the trees and gallop for railhead. We can at least put the Chief on his guard."

They led the ponies into the wood, then mounted and set off at full speed. Mr. Jackson looked grave when he heard their report, to which Will added the information given him by Antonio de Mello in the morning. He at once whistled up the other European members of his staff from the scattered points at which they were engaged. When they came up he explained the position to them.

"They mayn't bother us," he said, "but if they're making for railhead, as Mr. Pentelow says, we must be prepared for squalls. There's no highway in this direc-

tion, and if they're not making for us, where are they bound for?"

"Perhaps they're going to pay a visit to De Mello," suggested Will.

"Maybe. Well, forewarned is forearmed: the question is, what's to be our line if they show up here? Ruggles, you know the country better than the rest of us: what do you say?"

"Speak 'em fair, sir, but have your rifles ready."

"How many do they muster?"

"There seemed about thirty, but may be more. If they're revolutionaries they'll have plenty of cheek, and think themselves more than a match for our handful."

"What will our men do?"

"Nothing but look on. My notion is that they're after recruits, and the men won't join them unless they're obliged. They know they'd only be food for powder. But they've got no arms except machetes and their tools, and they won't run the risk of being shot at."

A tall engineer of about thirty, who had been leaning against a tree, with crossed legs, a pipe in his mouth, then quietly made a suggestion.

"If I were you, Chief," he said, "I'd try a little stratagem."

"How do you mean, O'Connor?"

The man took the pipe from his mouth and pointed with it towards the embankment, thirty yards from the Chief's tent.

"Line that with rifles," he said. "We muster fifteen all told, counting in the foremen, who'll stick by us, I fancy. We've got four or five revolvers, too. Well, my notion is to post our rifles out of sight on the reverse slope, just behind those trucks. The beggars will have to pass on this side, and they won't see us. It's about time to knock off work, and they won't be surprised if they see you on a camp-stool at the door of your tent reading. I can lend you a month-old *Times*."

"What then?"

"Why, they'll speak to you, I suppose, and you'll soon see if they're bent on mischief. Then you can give us a sign and we'll empty a few saddles."

"Rather strong measures, O'Connor."

"Why not try bluff first?" said Will.

"You've got an idea, have you? Come into my tent, and we'll talk it over. You too, O'Connor. You others, go and get the rifles; and, Ruggles, tell the men that a small armed party is coming this way, but they needn't be alarmed. They can get their suppers and keep out of the way."

The Chief, accompanied by Will and O'Connor, walked to his tent. It was separated by a few yards from the embankment on one side, and the tents of the European staff on the other. There was a broad open space in front of these, with a large tree standing in the middle. The approaching horsemen, if they came from

the expected direction, would pass between two groups of tents occupied by the labourers, into the compound, as it might be called, of which the tree marked the centre.

The colloquy in the Chief's tent did not last long. O'Connor came out first, still puffing at his pipe. Nobody in the camp was aware of it, but Jerry O'Connor had once held the King's commission in the Royal Engineers. There had been no more popular or capable officer in the corps than Jerry, and many were grieved when he had to leave the army, under a cloud. He was the best-liked member of the engineering staff of the new railway, and none get more work out of his men. He was soon joined by the other Europeans and the Venezuelan foremen, all armed with rifles. Knocking the ashes from his pipe, he put it into his pocket, and led his little company of thirteen to the rear of the embankment, where they lay flat on their faces just below the top, perfectly screened from observation on the other side.

Meanwhile Will also had left the Chief's tent, and made his way quickly towards a little wooden cabin that stood a few yards from the end of the railway line. As he approached, a slight young man with a swarthy sallow face came out of the cabin and walked towards the embankment. Will hailed him.

"The Chief wants you, Machado," he said.

"At once, señor? I was going to watch the horsemen who are said to be approaching. Perhaps I might be able to reassure the Chief."

"You had better come and see what he wants first."

The Venezuelan gave way with a shrug, and walked by Will's side to the tent, at the door of which Mr. Jackson was standing.

"Señor Machado," said the Chief, who was always scrupulously polite to the Spaniards on his staff, "I shall be glad of your assistance. These horsemen will be here in a few minutes, and I want you to remain here as a witness of what passes. Mr. Pentelow will remain also. We shall then have one of their own countrymen and one of mine, a useful precaution, you will agree."

Señor Machado smiled his assent. Mr. Jackson knew that, in dealing with revolutionaries in Venezuela, foreigners, and even peaceable natives, were, as he put it, between the devil and the deep sea. If he should be suspected of giving aid or countenance to the rebels he would be hauled over the coals by the Government. If he refused such aid he might be held in durance or perhaps attacked by the rebels. Whichever party proved victorious in the struggle would refuse to make good any loss he might sustain, while if either could foist upon him any charge of assisting the enemy he would lose all his property, and suffer imprisonment or fine. No evidence would probably be of any immediate avail if matters were brought to extremities; but it would be useful to have such evidence to lay before the British consul.

"You left a man at the cabin to call you if any message comes through?" said the Chief.

"Assuredly, señor; I think always of my duty."

"That's right. Just keep within easy reach. Here's a cigar."

Machado strolled up and down, smoking energetically. Will shot a glance at him. The man was a good telegraphist, and he had nothing against him; but he was not quite pleased to know that he had been so affable with José.

Mr. Jackson sat down at the door of the tent, and began to discuss with Will the entries the latter had made in his note-book.

"I think we look pretty easy," he said. "Still waters run deep.... Ah! here they are."

CHAPTER IV--SIMPLE SUBTRACTION

The cavalcade came at a walk into the compound. They were a very nondescript troop: men of all ages, tall and short, stout and thin, variously clad, but all wearing high riding-boots and a green feather in their sombreros. There were more of them than Will had supposed, numbering nearly fifty. The greater part of the troop halted when they came to the tree, but two rode forward, the first a thick-set man with bushy black eyebrows and heavy moustache. He pulled up within a few feet of Mr. Jackson, and making a military salute, said--

"Good-evening, señor."

Mr. Jackson got up and returned the salutation. Will stood at his side, and the telegraphist remained a little in the rear.

"I introduce myself, señor, as Captain Felipe Espejo, of the army of General Carabaño, liberator of Venezuela, and in his name I have the honour or requesting that you will of your great courtesy furnish my troop with refreshments."

"Do me the favour to enter my tent, Señor Capitan," said Mr. Jackson pleasantly. "No doubt you are weary after your ride."

The Captain hesitated for a moment, darting a glance around. Then he dismounted, and leaving his horse with his orderly, followed Mr. Jackson into the

tent. Will entered after him, and Machado stood in the entrance.

"Be seated, señor," said Mr. Jackson, offering him a cigar. "I am of course aware of the excellent custom of your country, which never refuses refreshment to the traveller, and speaking for myself and my staff, it would give us the greatest pleasure to entertain you and your men. But you will see, I am sure, that I am placed in a somewhat awkward position."

"Explain yourself, señor."

"I think I am right in believing that the noble liberator has not yet assumed the reins of government? In that case any voluntary service to you on my part, even though dictated solely by courtesy, is likely to be sadly misconstrued by the present Government, is it not? I am responsible for the interests of the Company employing me to build this railway, and I must take care that no action of mine shall prejudice them. You will agree, then, señor, that I cannot undertake to provide refreshment for so large a party as yours unless formal demand is made, which, backed by the armed force at your distinguished disposal, would undoubtedly exonerate my Company from all responsibility."

"You express yourself admirably, señor," said the visitor with a smile. "May I compliment you on your command of our language? As to a formal demand, I oblige you with the greatest pleasure. I demand now, formally, that you supply my troop with food."

"That is sufficient, Señor Capitan," said Mr. Jackson, returning the smile. "Pentelow," he added in English, "go and see to this. Don't be long.... I was about to have my own evening meal," he went on in Spanish, "and if the caballero would honour me by sharing the repast, I shall be delighted, though I fear it may not be so excellent in quality as the caballero is accustomed to."

The Captain cordially accepted the invitation. He felt that things were going extremely well. Mr. Jackson summoned his servant, and ordered him to lay for four. Machado was edging away, but Mr. Jackson called him into the tent.

"You will join us this evening," he said. "Señor Machado, telegraphist on my staff."

The two Venezuelans exchanged salutations, the Captain somewhat superciliously. The meal was soon ready; Will returned; and the four sat down at the table, Mr. Jackson opening a bottle of champagne--villainous stuff, which he kept by him expressly for native guests, who relished it as though it had been the finest vintage from Rheims or Vevay.

The Captain was an excellent table companion, and a man of quite charming manners. He did full justice to the food and drink. When the meal was over, and, provided with a good cigar, he lay back in a lounge chair, he said--

"Truly, señor, it gives me the greatest annoyance to have to requite your excellent hospitality by making a further request--or, to adopt the term you pre-

fer, a formal demand. My noble superior, General Carabaño, unfortunately lacks two things requisite to complete his success in the glorious task of liberating his beloved country from the yoke of a tyrant. These two things, señor, are men and money. General Carabaño has laid upon me the duty--never more irksome than in the present circumstances--of inviting, or, again accepting your term, of demanding, a small loan from your Company in both kinds, namely, money and men. The money shall be returned when the new Government is thoroughly established--I need not say, with accrued interest. The men also, when that glorious day arrives, will be again at the disposal of the Company, to which, in view of the goodwill displayed by its distinguished representative, a concession shall in due time be made, on terms afterwards to be decided, for the furtherance of its business."

The tone in which the Captain made this long speech was as pleasant and courteous as though he were announcing the conferment of a favour. Mr. Jackson was only surprised that the real purpose of his visit had not been disclosed before.

"I regret extremely, señor," he said, "that in my position I cannot take upon myself to make a loan of money. In doing so I should be acting entirely beyond my powers. But I will of course forward the request to my directors."

"Pardon me, señor," said the Captain suavely, "that is of course absurd. General Carabaño cannot delay the completion of his great work while time is wasted in such formalities. He must have men and money at once. I have no doubt that you have a considerable balance in your hands, beyond the immediate wages of your labourers. You will therefore be good enough to order the whole of your workers to be drawn up, so that I may select recruits, and at the same time count out a sum of five thousand pesos."

"With great respect, señor, I have to say that is my duty to protect whatever funds may be my charge, and also the peons who have been engaged by my Company under the laws of the State."

At this Captain Espejo's politeness fell from him like a cloak. He sprang up, threw his half-smoked cigar through the doorway of the tent, and cried--

"Enough of this folly! I offer you an amicable arrangement. You decline it. Then I take what I want by force."

"And may I ask how the caballero proposes to take what he wants by force?" said Mr. Jackson quietly.

All four men were now on their feet. Machado was restless with excitement. Will stood rigid, looking with admiration at his chief, whom he had never credited with such *sang froid* as he now displayed. When Mr. Jackson asked his question the Captain stared at him as though he had not heard him aright; then, motioning with his hand towards the men lounging beneath the tree, he said, with a laugh--

"Two score of my men, señor, could shepherd a thousand peons."

"Possibly, señor, but your number is really twenty."

The Captain stared again. What was this mad Englishman talking about?

"You are pleased to jest, señor," he said impatiently. "My troop numbers exactly forty-two."

"The matter is too serious for jesting, señor. I repeat, that for the purpose of enforcing your demand your troop is effectively less than a score. Be so good as to accompany me for a few yards and I will explain myself."

The Captain eyed his host suspiciously. Was it possible that he was to be led into some trap? But the Englishman looked perfectly inoffensive. He was unarmed; his thumbs were thrust into his arm-pits, presumably a habit of Englishmen. And there were the forty men, within pistol shot: there was really no reason why he should not humour the eccentric.

The Chief strolled along, towards the rear of the embankment. He led the Captain up the plank along which barrows were wheeled up the slope. Coming to the top, he pointed to the row of figures lying prone just below the crest, each man holding a rifle.

"You see there, señor, fourteen first-rate shots. At the least sign of hostility on the part of your troop, these men will fire. Each rifle covers a man. You will confirm my remark that, for the purpose of enforcing your demands, you have less than a score of men. At the first volley fourteen will be *hors de combat*; the second will account for as many more before they have recovered from their surprise; at the third you will have none left."

The Captain was speechless with fury. He looked at the men motionless on the embankment, at his unconscious troopers laughing and jesting below. He turned about and saw Will, smiling, at his elbow. The Chief stood in the same easy attitude of unconcern. With a muttered oath Captain Espejo turned on his heel, and strode down the embankment. Half-way down he wheeled about, and sputtered--

"You, Señor Inglese, have not seen the last of me. General Carabaño shall hear of this impertinence--this unparalleled atrocity; and he will exact a heavy retribution, I promise you."

He completed the descent, summoned his orderly and threw himself into the saddle, and then, riding up to his men, curtly ordered them to mount and follow him. The troop rode away in the direction whence they had come.

"I'm most terribly stiff," cried O'Connor, springing up. "I'm sorry you've done it, Chief; I should have liked a scrap with the beggars; but you're a wonderful man."

The Chief smiled.

"First catch your hare, then cook him," he said.

CHAPTER V--A SCRAP OF PAPER

Watching the horsemen as they rode away, Will suddenly remembered the prisoner whom he had seen running beside one of them. The man was now gone. Perhaps he had slipped away; perhaps the horseman at whose stirrup he had been tied had not accompanied the rest to the camp. He spoke of it to the Chief. The latter suggestion deepened the look of gravity on Mr. Jackson's face.

"I hope to goodness there are no more of them," he said. "We had better send a native to shadow them."

"I'll do that, Chief," said O'Connor, "with Ruggles. I wouldn't trust a native."

"Very well. Don't go too far. It'll be dark soon."

When O'Connor had set off with Ruggles on horseback, Mr. Jackson asked Will to go with him to his tent to talk things over.

"This is serious," he said. "I'm afraid we've only postponed the evil day. Whether this revolution succeeds or not we shall hear more of the rebels. The Government can't help us."

"Still, we couldn't be much worse off than if you had given in to the fellow. They'd have collared all our cash; and all our peons would have mutinied--all they didn't impress, that is."

"True. It would have meant a complete smash here. The peons would have made off to the woods, carrying their machetes with them, you may be sure, and they're worth two dollars apiece. We should never have seen them again: it would have brought our work to a standstill; and as the funds of the Company are rather low I shouldn't wonder if it had been crippled beyond hope of recovery. The business has suffered enough already. The worst of it is that we've still got that to look forward to."

"What can we do?" asked Will.

"Nothing, except stick on. I'll not budge till I'm compelled for all the Carabaños and Espejos in Venezuela. We'll go about our work as usual and keep

our eyes open. Our contract with the Government requires us to carry Government troops, but I'll refuse point-blank to carry any other armed force, and neither Government nor rebels will get any money out of me willingly."

They were still talking when O'Connor and Ruggles returned.

"We saw them cross the river about two miles up," said O'Connor, coming into the tent, "and they were joined by three more of the same kidney. It didn't seem worth while going any farther. But we haven't come back empty-handed."

"What have you got?" asked the Chief.

"Nothing very valuable: a poor wretch of an Indian. Ruggles is bringing him along. We found him hiding in the trees, and thought he might be a spy of theirs; but he turned out to be a runaway servant of the Captain's. He told Ruggles some story which I couldn't make out--here he is."

Ruggles entered, bringing with him a wretched-looking object. Will recognized him instantly as the man he had saved from the jaguar in the early morning. The Indian's face brightened as he saw his rescuer. He fell on his knees before him and begged for food. When he had eaten, with the ferocity of a starving man, what was given him, he said in answer to Will's questions that he had run away from Captain Espejo, who treated him cruelly. After the adventure with the jaguar he had recrossed the river, and unluckily stumbled upon the very man he had most wished to avoid. The Captain had thrashed him and tied him to the stirrup of one of his men; but taking advantage of a dense clump of forest through which they passed, he had wrenched his hands free and fled into the bush. Three of the party had dismounted and tried to track him, but he was more at home in the woodland than they, and had been able to elude them. These were the three men who, after their vain search, had rejoined the main party returning from their equally unsuccessful expedition.

"Well, he's another mouth to feed," said the Chief, "but I suppose we had better keep him and find something for him to do. What's your name?"

"Azito, señor," said the man humbly.

The Chief called up his servant, and ordered him to arrange a sleeping-place for the Indian. Then he dismissed him, and the four Englishmen, by the light of a lamp hanging from the roof of the tent, sat discussing the affair of the day and the steps to be taken on the morrow.

"I think we had better put the camp in a state of defence," said O'Connor. "If we don't protect ourselves, nobody will."

"That won't be much good," said the Chief, "we shall be shifting camp soon, and it'll be more than life's worth to attempt to fortify ourselves every time. Nothing short of a wall all round would be any good, and it would be tremendous work to build that: there's such a lot of us."

"As to shifting camp, we might put that off for a while--until next pay-day

at any rate; though it will mean a tramp for the men at night after work is done. If you'll leave the defences to me I'll see what can be done."

"But the camp might be raided while we are miles away at railhead," said Will.

"We can put outposts out to give us notice of any armed party approaching; that might give us time to get back."

"You ought to have been a soldier, O'Connor. Cobbler, stick to your last, eh?"

O'Connor smiled.

"Leave it to me, Chief," he said. "I would just relish a brush with those ruffians."

"It's rather curious they came just after pay-day," said Will.

"Oh! I dare say they know what our arrangements are," replied Mr. Jackson. "It's no secret that we get our pay once a fortnight from Bolivar. We may expect a visit from them next pay-day, if not before. I only hope they won't bother us as they did the French company some years ago: they broke 'em, with the assistance of floods and earthquakes. Ah well! every cloud has a silver lining."

Next day O'Connor devoted himself to the fortification of the camp, employing a hundred men--a fourth of the whole company of peons--on the work. To lessen the labour, he took the embankment as one wall, and palisaded the top for about a hundred yards. Then he made a rough circular wall around the camp enclosure, using rails and sleepers and a number of trucks, defending the whole circuit with a chevaux-de-frise made of branches lopped from the neighbouring woods. Mr. Jackson doubted whether the terms of their concession from the Government admitted the use of timber for this purpose, but O'Connor made the very pertinent answer that permission to build a railway was of little value unless it included the right to defend the line and those employed on it; upon which the Chief said no more.

These defensive works occupied several days. Before they were completed a muleteer came from the mines to report that Captain Espejo had visited them and demanded money from the manager. Luckily the fortnight's pay had not arrived, and his cash-box was almost empty; but the Captain had seized all the money that was left, and also impressed a score of the miners, who had been marched away, presumably to the head-quarters of General Carabaño.

During these days news was brought in by several of the haciendados of the neighbourhood, from whom the Chief obtained supplies of food, that General Carabaño had captured two or three small towns to the eastward, and recruited a considerable number of men, who were for the most part poorly armed, and still worse equipped. The workers on the railway were delighted at the discomfiture of Captain Espejo; none of them had any wish to share the unenviable lot of men

impressed in the revolutionary cause. At present they had hard work, but good pay; as hirelings of General Carabaño they would lead the life of dogs, liable to be whipped or slashed or even shot if they chanced to offend their officers, and to get no pay at all.

On the day after Captain Espejo's visit Mr. Jackson wrote to the Provincial Jefe at Ciudad Bolivar, with whom he was on good terms, relating what had happened, and asking for the protection of Government troops. He sent the letter by mounted messenger to the junction about fifty miles off, whence it was conveyed by rail. In two days he received a reply, in which the Jefe sympathized with his position, but said that he had just been obliged to dispatch the greater part of the force under his command to Caracas, which was threatened by a rising in Valencia. He could not further deplete his garrison without endangering Bolivar. His letter concluded with a strong warning to Mr. Jackson against affording any assistance to the rebels.

"We're between the devil and the deep sea," said the Chief, discussing the letter with his staff. "The Government can't help us, and leaves us at the mercy of the rebels; and yet it will punish us if we help them, which they may force us to do. What a country!"

"Why didn't you stay at home, Chief?" asked O'Connor.

"Because I didn't want to run the risk of clerking at thirty bob a week," replied Mr. Jackson. "That's the fate of many good men in the old country, worse luck."

Azito, the Indian, had attached himself to Will, constituting himself an additional servant, much to the disgust and jealousy of the negro José. The two quarrelled so frequently that Will thought it advisable to separate them. Accordingly he got Mr. Jackson to make use of Azito as a scout. He gave him a pony and sent him to learn what he could of the revolutionaries: where General Carabaño had fixed his head-quarters, how many men he had with him, and what his intentions were. The Indian was at first very reluctant to venture within reach of his late master; but on Will promising that he should be well paid and provided for, the man consented, rather from blind devotion to his rescuer than from any other motive.

Returning after two days' absence, he reported that General Carabaño was quartered in a hill-village about twenty-five miles north-east of railhead. His force, as estimated by the Indians of the neighbourhood, consisted of some five hundred men. It was rumoured that the General, when he considered himself strong enough, intended to attack Ciudad Bolivar, on the Orinoco about forty-five miles farther to the north-east. His numbers were being continually increased, but he was obviously in great need of money, and had already begun to make forced requisitions on the haciendados and the Indians. Mr. Jackson devoutly hoped that

money would not be forthcoming. A leader of strong personality could easily and at any time gather a large army of desperadoes in Venezuela if he had the money to pay them.

The day after Azito's return the camp suffered from one of the periodical disasters which it was impossible to foresee or to guard against. A violent tornado swept over the district, uprooting immense trees, whirling the tents away, and scattering their contents in all directions. It was all over in a few minutes, but the mischief done would take days to repair. Will was walking over the ground, seeking to recover his possessions among the litter, when he happened to find a sheet of the Company's official paper on which he saw that a rough plan was drawn. He picked it up, thinking it might be one of the Chief's papers; but on further examination he was surprised to find that it was a sketch of the encampment, or rather of that part of it occupied by the engineering staff. The position of each tent was marked, and distinguished by a letter of the alphabet. Will thought the paper must belong to O'Connor, and took it to him. At the moment O'Connor had his arms full of pyjamas and underwear which he had just collected from the havoc of the storm. His inseparable pipe was in his mouth.

"Is this yours?" asked Will, showing him the paper.

"Never saw it before," mumbled O'Connor. "What is it?"

"A plan of part of the camp."

"What would I want with a plan of the camp? Perhaps the Chief has been amusing himself. Try him."

But the Chief denied all knowledge of the paper.

"I've got something better to do than draw unnecessary plans. What's the good of it?"

"Nothing, except as information to an enemy."

"Ah! that's an idea now. 'A chiel amang us takin' notes,' eh? A wolf within the fold. I'll skin him if I catch him. Do you suspect any one?"

"Sangrado's got a shifty eye."

"Which of 'em hasn't!" said the Chief grimly. "I don't trust any of these Venezuelans beyond eyeshot. Well, he's had his trouble for nothing. There's no camp left, and we'll take care to arrange things differently now. Get a gang to move the safe, there's a good fellow: hanged if it isn't about the only thing left standing."

The safe was conveyed on trolleys to another part of the enclosure, and the Chief's tent was reerected around it. During the next few days he watched the native foremen narrowly, but saw nothing to lead him to suspect any one of them to be the traitor. They appeared indeed to be in good spirits over the news which had just come in through Antonio de Mello, who visited the camp one day and reported that the Government had made some progress in stamping

out the revolt in Valencia. Free from danger in that quarter, it might be expected that the Government troops would soon be at liberty to deal with the outbreak in Guayana; and if General Carabaño had not succeeded in capturing Bolivar before there was a movement against him, his chance of ultimate success was very small. De Mello confirmed Azito's information as to the General's lack of money, which was the strongest weapon the Government possessed.

Sangrado, the foreman whom Will had mentioned, declared that the rebuff Captain Espejo had suffered would prove to be the ruin of the revolution. It had not merely deprived the General of the sinews of war on which he had no doubt confidently reckoned, but had so much damaged his prestige that he would find great difficulty in obtaining recruits.

"A courier will come one day, señor," said the man, "with the thanks of the Government. You will be a great man in Venezuela."

"We won't hallo until we are out of the wood," replied the Chief. "You don't want a revolution, then, Sangrado?"

"Certainly not, señor, nor any of us. We know which side our bread is buttered."

"Honesty is the best policy," remarked the Chief to the Englishmen of his staff afterwards. "I think the men are all right as long as they get their pay. But I'm not so sure they'd stick to us if a higher bidder came along."

The disorder in the camp was repaired: the work went steadily on: and as the line advanced, and the distance between railhead and the camp increased, Mr. Jackson began to think of shifting to another site, and questioned whether it would be worth while to spend time in fortifying it. He decided to remain in his present quarters until after next pay-day. The money would arrive by train from Bolivar, together with a large quantity of stores, the wages of the peons being paid partly in kind.

On the morning of the day when the train was expected, Machado handed the Chief a telegraphic message to the effect that the agent of the Company in Bolivar had sent six extra trucks with rails just landed from a steamer that had arrived from Antwerp, the contract for rails being in the hands of a Belgian firm.

"They're a few weeks before they are due," said the Chief, "but that's a fault on the right side. When will the train arrive?"

"About two, señor."

"That means four, I suppose. No doubt we shall get a wire from the junction as usual."

Just after twelve o'clock Machado reported that the train had left the junction, and might be expected in about three hours. The arrival of the fortnightly train was always a matter of interest in the camp. It had become the custom for the peons to strike work and crowd about railhead on these occasions. Mr.

Jackson and several of his staff were always present to take formal receipt of the consignment of goods and money, the latter being escorted from the lock-up van to the safe in the Chief's tent.

About four o'clock Mr. Jackson took up his position with the three Englishmen beside the line. Several of the peons stood at hand, ready to transfer the cash to a trolley. The rest of the labourers congregated noisily close by. The appearance of the engine among the trees far away was hailed with a loud shout. In a few minutes the train, longer than usual, drew up; Mr. Jackson stepped forward to the lock-up van, with his duplicate keys of the two huge padlocks on the door. The six trucks behind, covered with canvas, would not be unloaded until the money had been bestowed in the safe.

[image]

A SCRIMMAGE AT RAILHEAD

He had just thrown the door open, and ordered the peons to lift out the bags of money, when there was a sudden outcry. Looking round, he was amazed to see a swarm of armed men rushing upon him, the nearest no more than two yards away. Before he or any other of the staff could lift a hand to defend himself, he was hurled to the ground, O'Connor and Ruggles lying beside him. Will, who happened to be a little nearer to the engine, made an attempt to bolt, and succeeded in springing down the embankment, only to find himself in the midst of a score of the assailants. He dodged two or three of them, with the agility of an old Rugby player, but was then tripped up and fell headlong, being immediately pounced on and held. The first man he saw when he collected himself was Machado the telegraphist, who had seized one of his arms and looked at him with a smile of malicious triumph.

"You are the traitor, then," thought Will. "I might have known it, after your sniffing round after my hydroplane."

In a few minutes all the European members of the staff lay trussed up on the slope of the embankment, Captain Espejo himself superintending the operation. The money had been seized. The native foremen, accepting their fate with the Spaniard's usual nonchalance, stood idly by, puffing at their cigarros. Many of the peons had taken to their heels and fled into the woods. But the majority had been too much cowed even to run, especially when several shots were fired among the fugitives as a warning. Captain Espejo summoned them to stand, declaring that they were now in the service of his excellency General Carabaño, the new President, and that any man who resisted would be instantly shot. Then, seeing

that the four Englishmen were securely bound, he made his way to the Chief's tent among a group of his officers, ordering his men, who numbered nearly a hundred, to find quarters for themselves and take what they required from the stores in the train.

CHAPTER VI--THE HOLE IN THE WALL

It would not be becoming to record the exact words used by O'Connor as he lay, within a few feet of Will, on the slope of the embankment. They were very expressive, and very warm, so warm indeed that Mr. Jackson just beyond him suggested that he should "draw it mild." Ruggles, a little farther away, did not utter a word, and for some moments Will simply listened sympathetically to O'Connor, who undoubtedly expressed the feelings of them all.

"It was Machado, after all," said Will at length.

This provoked another explosion from O'Connor, who said a great deal as to what he would do to Machado when he got him.

"Yes, the scoundrel!" said Mr. Jackson. "He and his telegraph have done it. I'll take care another time to have an English telegraphist."

Machado had in fact telegraphed in the Chief's name to Bolivar, asking that six empty trucks should be coupled to the usual train. He had further instructed that the train should stop at a place about twenty miles from railhead to load up sleepers, which were cut from the forest for use on the railway. When the train pulled up at the appointed spot there was no load of sleepers, but a company of armed rebels, who sprang into the empty trucks, and covered themselves with canvas, Captain Espejo having ordered the driver, a Spaniard, to take them on to railhead, threatening him with instant death if he attempted to give warning.

"I wonder what they will do with us," said Mr. Jackson.

"I hope they'll take us away from this pretty soon," said Will. "There's a fly on my nose, and I can't shake it off."

"My throat is like an oven," growled O'Connor.

"One glass of beer!" sighed Ruggles: "just one: there's no harm in one."

Their plight was indeed desperately unpleasant. They were laid on the sunny side of the embankment. The afternoon sun beat full upon them, and before long they were subject to the pressing attentions of innumerable insects, which, their arms being bound, they were unable to drive away. They got some relief by turning over on their faces, but as time went on the heat, the insects, and their thirst made them thoroughly wretched. More than once O'Connor yelled for some one to bring him a drink; but no attention was paid to him, and it seemed as if Captain Espejo, for all his charming manners, was bent on slowly grilling them to death.

Just before sunset, however, a bugle sounded. Sitting up, the prisoners witnessed the arrival of General Carabaño himself. He rode in amid a group of twenty officers, who formed a sort of guard of honour. Captain Espejo had paraded his men to welcome the General, whom they received with a volley of sounding vivas. Behind rode a long line of cavalry in all sorts of costumes, many of them having a led horse, no doubt the steeds of Captain Espejo's party. Behind these came a long procession of animals and men, the latter the most motley collection of ruffians Will had ever seen. Some were mounted on mules, some on donkeys; some had saddles, some rode bare-backed. There were bridles of leather, of rope, of bejuco, a climbing plant that grows plentifully in the forests. Some had no bridles at all, but clung to the donkey's mane, guiding it by a slap on the right or left ear, or a thump on the flank.

When Will thought he had seen the last of them enter, he was amazed to find that they were followed by a regiment of Caribbee infantry, who had already earned from the Government troops the name of Carabaño's bloodhounds. Their only clothing was a narrow strip about the waist and the feathers in their hair. Each had a lance, and a bow and quiver slung over the back.

"A dashed fine-looking lot," said O'Connor, admiring these muscular redskins. "You could make something of those fellows."

"The General looks a Tartar," said Will.

"There's a good deal of the negro in his composition, I'll swear," remarked Mr. Jackson. "That's a bad look-out for us; there's no more insufferable brute than your negro in authority."

General Carabaño in truth looked an unpleasant man to deal with. He was very big and tall, with a large fat face, a wide nose and thick lips, and woolly hair. He sat his horse in the middle of the compound by the tree until his men had all marched in. Then, after a few words with Captain Espejo, he rode towards the prisoners. Halting opposite them, he told his orderlies to stand them on their feet, and then, assuming a haughty demeanour, he demanded to know what they meant by rebelling against his Government. None of them replied. Enraged at their silence, he declared that he would shoot them. On this, however, Captain

Espejo deferentially suggested that the penalty might be at least deferred.

"They are Englishmen, Excellency," he said, "and if you treat them as they undoubtedly deserve there will be trouble with their Government, which may seriously embarrass the consolidation of your administration."

"Caramba!" cried the General: "their Government is thousands of miles away."

"True, Excellency; but it is above all things essential that the lives of foreigners should be spared if you wish your Government to be recognized."

"Well, we will think of it. Set a guard over them to-night, Señor Capitan, and take care that none of them escapes. Where is that loyal friend of the State, Señor Machado?"

The prisoners' feet were unbound, and they were led away to one of the tents, so that they did not hear the conversation between the General and Machado. The upshot of this was that the telegraphist flashed a message to Bolivar in Mr. Jackson's name, saying that the engine had broken down, and asking for another train to be dispatched with bridging materials and other things which he found himself in need of. The General's aim was to get possession of as much rolling stock as possible for the transport of his troops to Bolivar when the time arrived. The city was a hundred and thirty miles distant by rail, though less than half that distance across country, and the junction was fifty miles from railhead, so that with care and the assistance of Machado it would be easy to prevent news of what had happened from reaching the Jefe. The camp was situated in a part of the country remote from highways, and the mounted men whom the General had placed at various points would prevent any messengers from getting through in either direction.

The prisoners were given a meal; then they were bound again and left in the tent, a strong guard being posted outside. They spent a most uncomfortable night. After Captain Espejo's remonstrance they did not suppose the General would shoot them; but uncertainty as to their fate and distress at the ruin of the Company's business worried them, and they were sleepless during the greater part of the night, discussing their situation in low tones.

Next day they were not allowed to leave the tent. They saw nothing of the General, who was in fact busy following up his operations of the previous evening. He got Machado to telegraph to head-quarters for more money. The reason given was that a wash-out--one of the sudden floods to which the country is subject--had destroyed a large quantity of stores, which must be replaced on the spot by purchases from the neighbouring haciendados. He impressed into his service such of the peons and foremen as he thought worthy of it, and drove the rest from the camp, no doubt feeling confident that by the time any of them could make their way over difficult country to Bolivar that town would have fallen into

his hands.

The supplies and money requisitioned arrived late on the following day. The General had now two locomotives and thirty wagons, including those that were permanently at railhead for construction purposes. The personnel of the two trains were kept under guard, to prevent them from making off with the engines.

Meanwhile the General, finding the rough camp at railhead little to his taste, had shifted his quarters to Antonio de Mello's residence about five miles below. The news of the coup had been conveyed to De Mello instantly by some of the Indians who had fled from the camp, and he had hurriedly quitted the place for another estate of his many miles to the south, where his mother and sister were living. The hacienda was left in charge of the servants. De Mello knew that he could make no resistance to the appropriation of his house by the revolutionary leader; the utmost he could do was to remove his horses. It was not very patriotic conduct; but patriotism is not a common virtue in that land of revolution.

The General took up his quarters in the hacienda with some of his staff, including Captain Espejo, their horses being placed in the new stables. The sight of the old stables suggested to Espejo that the prisoners might be conveyed thither, so that they should be constantly under the General's eye. Accordingly they were marched in under escort of cavalry, O'Connor fuming at the indignity, which gave the others a little amusement. Will even cracked a joke when each was given a loose-box, remarking that it was the first time he had been in a box, the dress circle having been hitherto the height of his attainment.

Unknown to the prisoners, a telegraph cabin had been hurriedly rigged up for Machado at the railway line within a short distance of the house. The General had found the man so useful that he deemed it convenient to have him close at hand. It seemed advisable also that his troops should be more closely in touch with him than they could be in the old camp, so he ordered the tents to be struck, and all the stores and other things that would be useful to be transferred to a new camp about half-a-mile in the rear of the hacienda.

Will's box was in the centre, and through the open door he could see two sentries marching to and fro. Another sentry was posted at the door of the hacienda. He could see also the comings and goings of the General and his staff. They often walked up and down on the terrace in front of the house. The door of the stables was usually open during the day-time, but it was closed at night, and a sentry came on guard within. General Carabaño had given orders that the prisoners were to be prevented from communicating with one another. At first they disregarded the command, but when Captain Espejo threatened to gag them if they persisted they thought it best to remain silent, irksome though the restriction was. One of the annoyances of their situation was the impertinent curiosity of the officers and such of the men as came on various errands to the hacienda.

The former sometimes lolled at the door, smoking their long cigarros, and jesting among themselves at the four prisoners, who sat in enforced silence in the mangers. When the officers were not present, their servants copied them, and drove O'Connor almost frantic with their insulting remarks. The other three, not so sensitive as the fiery Irishman, accepted their lot more philosophically.

Meanwhile General Carabaño's force was increasing. News of his exploit had been carried through the neighbourhood, and since nothing succeeds like success, it had had the effect of bringing to his flag many who hoped to share in his expected triumph. There was at present plenty of provisions in the camp, and with the serviceable Machado at his elbow, the General could always telegraph for further supplies. Will hoped that De Mello would have informed the authorities at Caracas of what had occurred, and that a Government force would be dispatched to deal with the General; but De Mello had gone in the opposite direction. Moreover, the Government had its hands full in the north, and there was no chance of present assistance from that quarter.

On the second day of the imprisonment, Will, looking through the doorway, caught sight of a black figure lurking among some bushes on the farther side of the lake, not far from the house. It seemed very much like his negro boy José, and to assure himself on the point, he walked as far as the sentry would allow him towards the door. As he came into the light the negro apparently recognized him and impulsively started forward: then, fearing discovery, slipped back again into the bushes.

"I wonder what he is after," thought Will.

At that moment he saw Machado leave the house, and walk slowly round the margin of the lake as if going for an aimless stroll. All at once he sprang forward, and before the negro could get away, Machado pounced on him and hauled him to the house. They disappeared through the doorway, and though Will kept a pretty careful watch on it for the rest of the day, he did not see the boy come out again.

That night it occurred to him that, though speaking was forbidden, he might yet communicate with the Chief, whose box was next to his own. They both knew the Morse code, though neither had any expert knowledge of telegraphy, and Will experimented by tapping gently on the partition, spelling out the words, "Are you awake?" For some time he received no reply, and thought that the Chief must either be asleep or did not understand that the taps had any meaning. By and by, however, when the question was repeated for the fourth time, Will was delighted to hear answering taps, which he made out to be, "All right: I twig: be careful."

The conversation that ensued was a very laborious one. The prisoners were afraid of attracting the attention of the sentry, and sometimes tapped so gently that neither could understand the other. At the best, spelling a message by means of dots and dashes is a lengthy process. But by and by the snores of Ruggles and

the incessant croaking of the bullfrogs that infested the canal and lake covered the slight sounds on the partition, and the prisoners conversed more freely. What they said to each other in this way is as follows--

"Machado has caught my boy José and lugged him into house."

"Ware hydroplane."

"I shall be sick if they find it."

"They'll make the boy tell."

"Wish I could get away."

"Wishing won't do it."

"No."

"Door locked, sentry inside and out: no go."

"Wish I could, though."

"Impossible."

"Nothing's impossible."

"Rubbish!"

"If I can!"

"You can't."

"I might get to Bolivar."

"No good if you could."

"They'd send help."

"They wouldn't. Country disturbed: would have sent escort with train if could."

"Can't we do anything?"

"No: go to sleep."

"Can't sleep."

"No such word as can't."

"I can escape then."

"Rubbish."

"Rotten business."

"Go to sleep."

But Will remained awake for some hours, beating his brains for some means of breaking prison. With a brick wall behind him, a sentry at the door inside, another outside, he had to confess at length that the idea seemed hopeless, and gave it up in despair.

Next night again, after a fruitless conversation with the Chief, he lay awake still pondering the problem. All at once he thought he heard a slight scratching on the wall behind him. Before he could assure himself that he was not mistaken the sound ceased. He waited anxiously. Yes: without doubt some person or animal was scratching on the bricks, and judging by the sound the wall must be very thin. He tapped gently with his finger-nail on the brickwork. The scratching

ceased for a considerable time; then began again. Once more he tapped, wondering whether a friend outside was trying to communicate with him: once more the sound stopped; it seemed as though the scratcher had given a hint that he should discontinue tapping. He lay listening. By and by the scratching recommenced, and went on continuously. Will fell asleep with the sound in his ears, and when he was waked by the sentry opening the door, he almost believed he had heard it in a dream.

The prisoners were taken out for an airing each day, being carefully kept apart. Will looked around eagerly as he walked along by the side of the sentry, to see if there was any clue to the proceedings of the night. Passing along the side of the stables, he glanced at the back wall, but there was nothing to indicate the presence of any one. Tropical weeds grew in profusion behind the stables, nothing having been done to clear the ground since they had been disused. All day he kept his eye on the front of the house. There was the usual coming and going of the inmates, but never a sign that any one of them was a friend.

Shortly after nightfall, the scratching began. It was so quietly done that there was no danger of the sentry hearing it through the croaking of the frogs. Will could no longer doubt that some one was trying to get through the wall. He tapped on the partition.

"Do you hear scratching?"

"No. Mosquitoes or ants?"

"Some one trying to make hole in wall."

"Rubbish."

"Fact."

"Must be a fool."

Will did not attempt further to convince this doubting Thomas, but listened hopefully to the continuous scratching. It went on for hours, and by and by, as it seemed to be coming nearer, he thought of passing his hand over the surface of the brickwork. It touched, just below him, the point of a sharp instrument, and he discovered that the whole of the mortar above two bricks had been scraped away. He wished that he could have helped his unknown friend, but he had neither knife nor any other implement. The knowledge that some one was trying to release him kept him awake all that night, and he perspired with anxiety lest when morning came the work should be discovered. But the sentry did not approach the wall. The day seemed to drag terribly, even though he slept a good part of it. Never in his life had he been so eager for night to come.

Before the next dawn there was a gap in the wall almost large enough for him to crawl through. He bent down to it, and spoke in a whisper; but the only answer was the thrusting back of the bricks into their place. Hearing the Chief grunting in the next box, Will resolved to acquaint him with the progress the

unknown worker had made.

"There's hole in wall nearly big enough to squeeze through."

"Honest Injun?"

"Yes. One more night's work will finish it."

"Who's doing it?"

"Don't know. Shall I ask him to make one for you?"

The Chief did not immediately reply.

"Shall I?"

"I've been thinking. No."

"Why not?"

"We'd want four. Take a fortnight."

"Couldn't we overpower sentry and all get away through this hole?"

"No: too risky. Fellow outside would hear scuffle. Certain to. Sure you can get out?"

"To-morrow or next day."

"Make for hydroplane. Less risk for one. Go to Bolivar and get help if you can. Most likely you can't."

"Pity we can't tell others. They don't understand code."

"They'll know soon enough. There'll be a fine hullabaloo when the sentry misses you. Don't go without saying good-bye."

In the middle of the next night Will found that the opening was large enough to admit his body. He tapped on the partition. There was no answer. He tapped again: still no answer. The Chief was asleep. Fearing to let his chance slip, Will determined to go at once. Slowly and cautiously he wriggled through to the outside. A dark form was crouching among the weeds close to the opening. It gave a low grunt as Will appeared. Azito rose from his kneeling posture and began to move away, creeping like a shadow along the wall. Will stole after him.

CHAPTER VII--CARABAÑO'S PLANS

Azito after a few steps turned aside from the stables, from the other side of which came the heavy tramp of the sentry's feet, and struck into the undergrowth towards a small plantation about three hundred yards from the house. They bent low to avoid observation, but the night was so dark that they must have been invisible at the distance of ten feet. Not till they were safe among the trees did either speak a word; then Will asked the Indian to stop. They looked back towards the house. Several of the rooms were lit up, and broad beams of light threw a ghostly radiance on the gardens around.

"Thank you, Azito," said Will in low tones.

"I did it, señor, not José," replied the man.

"Ah! what do you know of José?"

"We wanted, both of us, señor, to make a hole in the wall, but we did not know where the señor was in the stables. José tried to find out, but Señor Machado caught him."

"And where were you?"

"I was in the wood on the other side of the lake. I saw all that happened, señor."

"Where is José now?"

"I do not know, señor. I did not see him come out of the house."

Will wished that his rescuer had been José rather than the Indian, for the negro boy had been his servant for many months, and had often helped him with the hydroplane. To find the hydroplane and set off in it to Bolivar was the immediate duty of the moment. It would be no easy matter to find his way to it in the dark, and he felt the lack of José's guidance; but since it seemed impossible to have José, he determined to do his best with Azito.

They had not gone far, however, when Azito remarked that when hiding in the wood he had heard José cry out, as if he were being whipped.

"Why didn't you tell me before?" demanded Will, stopping short.

"It was so little to tell, señor," replied the man.

It was indeed a trifling matter to Azito. The Indians were accustomed to being struck, sometimes in punishment for faults, sometimes in wanton mischief and delight in witnessing pain. But it was no trifling matter to Will, and remembering the Chief's suggestion that Machado had captured José in order to discover from him the whereabouts of the hydroplane, Will resolved to retrace his steps, go to the house, and at least try to find out what was happening to the boy. When he told Azito this, the Indian said the señor was not wise.

"It must be done," replied Will.

"I will go, señor."

"No, no; stay where you are. You have done enough. Lend me your knife, and wait for me here."

He took the Indian's long knife, and having no belt, had to carry it in his hand.

"Which room did José's cries come from?" he asked.

"A room in the front, señor."

This was awkward. In order to get to the front of the house he must either go past the stables or make a long circuit through the gardens. Since there were lights in the side of the house visible to him, it was very probable that the rooms in the front were also lit up. This would make it difficult to approach unseen, and he thought for a moment of waiting until the lights were put out for the night; but he saw on reflection that his chance of discovering the negro in the dark would be very small. He decided therefore to make for the back of the house, and to let his future proceedings be guided by circumstances.

As he left the shelter of the plantation he saw to his right the lights of the camp, from which came a continuous hum. It was long past the time for "lights-out" with any well-disciplined force; but discipline was lax in the army of General Carabaño, liberator of Venezuela. Will moved along rapidly, keeping at a distance from the house until he had assured himself as to the extent to which the back was illuminated. There was a dim light in one room: the rest were in darkness. Then he struck directly towards the house, avoiding, as he drew nearer, the triangle of ground illuminated by the light in the room, and so came to the veranda.

The general construction of the house was familiar to him through having been several times the guest of De Mello. The rooms opened on to the patio within, and several had doors of communication between them. The only door to the outside besides that of the main entrance led from the servants' quarters on the right-hand side looking towards the lake. De Mello's own sanctum was the centre room on the left-hand side opposite the stables. To reach it from the back of the house one had either to go along the patio until one came to the door, or to enter

from the bedroom adjoining. It struck Will as probable that General Carabaño would have appropriated the private den of the owner, as it was certainly the most comfortable room in the house, and convenient in having the bedroom next to it. The important matter at the moment, however, was not General Carabaño's quarters, but José's.

Will stood in the darkness under the veranda, considering what he had better do. He peeped into the lighted room: it was a small bed-chamber. A candle-lamp was burning on a bracket. The next room was in darkness, but the French window was open, and from the patio beyond came the muffled hum of voices. Evidently some of the officers were taking their ease there. Listening to make sure that no one was approaching, Will stepped into the room, stole to the door, and gently opened it an inch, so that he could see into the patio. It was cloudy with tobacco smoke. Half-a-dozen officers sprawled in comfortable chairs, within easy reach of small tables on which stood bottles and glasses. But Will could not see General Carabaño or Captain Espejo.

He felt himself at a check. Certainly he could not venture into the patio; the room in which he stood did not communicate with those on either side of it. He went out again: it occurred to him to try De Mello's dressing-room, which was on the left-side of the house, next to the bedroom. From the plantation he had seen that the bedroom itself was lit up, but he did not remember whether there had been a light in the dressing-room also. Stealthily creeping round the wall, he came to the window of the dressing-room, and found that it was itself in darkness, though a light came through from the bedroom, the door being slightly ajar. He tried the catch of the French window: it was not fastened, so that he could enter the room. His heart almost failed him at the thought of the risk of being discovered, but having come so far he was not disposed to return without making an attempt to discover what had happened to José. He noiselessly opened the window and stepped in.

Now he heard muffled voices. He peeped into the bedroom: it was empty. A lamp stood on a table. The door opening into De Mello's sanctum was partly open, and it was from this room that the voices proceeded. There being no sound of movement, he stole across the room on tiptoe and peeped into the room beyond. A screen stood just within, completely hiding the occupants. He now distinguished General Carabaño's fruity voice, and it suddenly flashed upon him that he might discover something even more important than José's whereabouts. Slipping back into the bedroom, he glanced quickly round to learn the position of the articles of furniture in case he had to escape suddenly; then he turned out the light and crept back to the door. The General was still speaking.

"The only doubtful point, Espejo, is whether we can time our attack from the railway so that it is simultaneous with Colonel Orellana's from the south-east.

The Jefe at Bolivar has no doubt received the message recalling the reinforcements that have just reached him--that is to say, if your friend at the central telegraph office is as clever as you were, Señor Machado. He has something to work for, and be sure neither you nor he shall be forgotten when Caracas is in our hands."

"If any one can pull off your little plan, Excellency," said Machado's smooth voice, "it is my friend Pereira."

"Good. Now this is the only doubtful spot." Will heard the crackle of paper: the General had apparently unfolded a map. "Colonel Orellana should be through the swamps south of Bolivar by mid-day to-morrow. If our good fortune holds he may get close to the city unobserved. At any rate, as he will be marching for the greater part of the night, his movement will scarcely be discovered before the Government troops leave on their return journey in the early morning. At that time Colonel Orellana should be about twenty-five kilometres from the city. His attack from the south-east will be commenced at noon, a good time to catch them napping. If we start before eight we can run through in four hours provided the line is clear, and I think we can trust the signalman at the junction: he has too much at stake to fail me. The only doubtful point, as I say, is here--Santa Marta. All depends on our surprising the man there. How much of the line is visible from the station at Santa Marta, Señor Machado?"

"About three kilometres, Excellency."

"A pity. If anything arouses the suspicion of the man there he can send a message to Bolivar in a few seconds and wreck the whole scheme. How is it he also is not a friend of yours?"

"His mother's cousin holds a good position in the administration, Excellency."

"That place shall be yours when I form my administration."

"Is it certain, Excellency," asked Espejo, "that the bridge beyond Santa Marta is mined?"

"I can trust my information on that point, and I am pretty sure that our coup here has not leaked through, thanks to Señor Machado's friend at the junction and our other precautions. There is one risk: that Señor de Mello has given information. It was a bad mistake of yours not to secure him, Espejo, and I am annoyed with you. But it cannot be helped. The only thing wanted to complete the perfection of our arrangements is to surprise the station at Santa Marta. How is it, Señor Machado, that you cannot find the hydroplane about which we have heard so much? If we had it, it would be quite easy to approach Santa Marta from the river; they would think it was the mad Englishman on one of his jaunts. If we could only capture the signalman there, and you took his place, we could quite rely on your ability to keep the people at Bolivar from becoming suspicious. I compliment you, señor, on your extreme ingenuity in conducting the commu-

nications with Bolivar during the past few days. It required a man of genius to prevent the railway people from smelling a rat."

"You do me too much honour, Excellency," said Machado, his gratification manifest in his tone of voice. "But I fear I can't keep it up for another day. I have to make so many excuses and explanations; and from the last two or three messages that have come through from Bolivar I can't help feeling that the people there are becoming uneasy."

"The more reason for striking at once. Why can't you find the hydroplane?" asked the General with some impatience.

"I have done my best, Excellency. I believe the negro knows where it is, but he is a perfect mule, and neither starvation nor whipping has any effect upon his stubbornness."

"Caramba! are there not other means of taming mules? Fetch the boy. We'll see."

Will heard Machado rise from his chair and open the door leading to the patio. José was staunch, then. Will set his teeth at the thought of the ill-usage the boy had had to endure. His clutch tightened on Azito's knife, and he scarcely heeded what passed between Carabaño and his lieutenant during the few seconds of Machado's absence.

"Here he is, Excellency."

"Ah! this is the mule. Now, mule, answer my question: where is your master's boat?"

Will waited tensely: not a word came from the boy's lips. There was the sound of a blow.

"Answer me," shouted the General, "or I will have you flogged. Where is the boat?"

"I cannot tell, señor," said the boy.

"Dog, do you call his Excellency 'señor'!" cried Espejo; and again there came the sound of a blow. "Where is the boat?"

"I have a thought? Excellency," said Machado suddenly, as the boy was silent. "I will try the electric battery: that will make him speak."

"Caramba! you had better make him speak somehow, or I'll flay him alive. Are my plans to be ruined by a dog of a negro? Take him away, and shock it out of him."

Will quivered as he heard the boy cry out: one of the three had struck him again. But Machado was dragging José from the room: where was he taking him? Will did not know of the temporary cabin erected for the telegraphist at the railway line a few hundred yards away: surely, he thought, Machado did not intend to convey the boy at this time of night to the old camp five miles distant. Yet he had seen no wire connecting the line with the house. It flashed upon him

that if Machado left the house, and was not accompanied by any of the officers, an opportunity of rescue might offer. Quick as thought he slipped across the bedroom into the dressing-room and out on to the veranda. Running round to the back of the house, he stood in a dark corner to watch. Presently he saw Machado issue forth with José from the door in the servants' quarter. The boy's hands were tied.

Machado dragged him across the garden towards the railway line. Waiting a few moments to make sure that no one was accompanying them, Will followed quietly, losing them from sight as they passed through a shrubbery. He could not risk discovery by Machado yet, for a cry would bring a crowd in pursuit. Quickening his steps, he saw the two proceeding towards a cabin just below the railway embankment. A light shone through a small square opening in the wall. Machado lifted the rough latch, pushed his victim into the cabin, entered after him, and shut the door. Will hurried to the unglazed window, and just as he reached it heard Machado say--

"Has there been a signal?"

"No, señor," was the reply.

Peeping in cautiously, Will saw one of General Carabaño's men, left there, no doubt, to summon Machado if there should come a call on the wires.

"Hold this brute," said Machado.

"What are you going to do, señor?" asked the man.

"Make a pig squeal. Now, you mule, one more chance before I prick you with a thousand pins. Where is that boat?"

José was evidently terrified at the unknown torture before him. He looked wildly around for a chance of escape, and struggled in the hands of his captor, who, however, held him fast. Meanwhile Machado had disconnected a couple of wires, and reached up to a shelf to take down a bottle of acid for re-charging the battery. Clearly he was for no half measures now.

[image]

ASSAULT AND BATTERY

"What's that?" asked the man.

"Stuff to strengthen the battery," replied Machado. "I'm going to put a wire on each side of him, and add cells--there are plenty of them--until he owns up."

"Will it kill him?"

"I shouldn't wonder."

He laughed as he poured acid into the cell. Meanwhile Will had been worked up to a white heat of indignation. Without stopping to measure the risk,

he slipped the knife into his pocket, sprang noiselessly to the door, threw it open, and in two strides came within arm's length of Machado just as he was replacing the bottle. A blow with the right, and one with the left almost at the same instant, hurled the telegraphist to the ground. The man holding José was for the moment paralyzed with astonishment. Before he could recover himself, a heavy blow somewhere about his middle sent him to join Machado. Then Will, catching José by the arm, dragged him through the door and to the rear of the cabin, where with one stroke of Azito's knife he severed the cords binding the boy's wrists.

He had scarcely done so when he heard one of the men run shouting from the cabin. But, as Will had expected, the man made straight towards the house. Hurrying along the foot of the embankment for a few yards, Will struck to the right towards the plantation where he had left Azito, both he and José bending low to get what cover was possible from the long grass and occasional bushes. Before they reached the plantation they heard shouts from the house, which were soon answered from the camp some distance to their left. They ran as swiftly as possible, and Will gave a low whistle as he approached the trees. It was answered by Azito. They waited but a few moments, to see whether any of the figures which could be descried moving near the house were coming in their direction. Then all three plunged into the depths of the plantation, José leading in as straight a course as he could towards the recess where the hydroplane was hidden.

CHAPTER VIII--A RACE AGAINST TIME

Dark though it was, José led the way with complete confidence. But Will noticed that in a few minutes he left the heart of the wood and returned to the edge, where it bordered the plain. General Carabaño's camp was now behind them.

"We might tread on a snake or stumble on a tiger, señor," said the boy. "It is not safe to go through the wood at night."

These were perils which had scarcely occurred to Will, but he recognized that the negro was right. Progress along the edge of the wood, however, was hardly easier than it had been in the wood itself, for long grass, bushes, and briars

obstructed them at every few steps. After covering rather more than a mile, as Will guessed, it struck him that they would get along faster if they mounted the railway embankment and walked along the straight track. It was unlikely that pursuit would be carried far that night, since the direction of their flight could not be traced in the darkness. But there would be danger if the old camp was still occupied, or if any guards had been posted along the railway. He asked his companions whether they had any information on these points. Both assured him that the camp was deserted, and that no sentinels were posted on the railway, at any rate between their present position and the junction. Will remembered that the signalman at the junction was in the pay of General Carabaño, so that the omission of what would otherwise have been an essential precaution was explicable.

The coast being clear, the travellers struck to the left, and came in ten minutes to the embankment.

"Creep up and look along the line," said Will to Azito. "You can see better in the dark than I."

The man returned after a few minutes and said that he saw the lights of the new camp twinkling among the trees, but nothing else was in sight in either direction. The rim of the moon which was just showing above the horizon would assist their march, but at the same time reveal their moving forms to any one who might be in the neighbourhood.

"Where are all the peons from the old camp?" asked Will.

"All run away, señor," replied Azito.

"We ran away too, señor," added José, "but came back to find our master."

"Have you had anything to eat lately, either of you?" asked Will, a thought striking him.

José had eaten nothing all the previous day; Azito nothing but some fruit he had picked in the garden of the house after nightfall.

"We must get some food to-morrow, or we shall be fit for nothing," said Will, "though I don't know where it is to come from."

They were now walking along the railway track, stepping from sleeper to sleeper. Every now and then they stopped to look behind, but though they could see farther as the moon rose, nothing was visible along the line. As they marched along in silence, Will thought over the conversation he had heard in the house. An attack was to be made on Bolivar at noon next day, from two quarters simultaneously. Machado's confederate in the telegraph office had invented a telegram from Caracas demanding the instant dispatch of reinforcements, so that the garrison at Bolivar would be much reduced, and the Jefe would be at a disadvantage. If Will could only get the hydroplane and bring it safely past the enemy, he would have time at least to warn the Jefe. The distance by water was about a hundred and

sixty miles, thirty miles more than by rail; but General Carabaño did not intend to start before eight o'clock, by which time, all being well, the hydroplane would be a considerable distance on the way to Bolivar. As soon as he got to Santa Marta, a little station twenty miles beyond the junction, he could telegraph a warning to the Jefe, the signalman being loyal. Everything depended on his reaching Santa Marta undetected.

They came at length to the site of the old camp. It was a picture of desolation. The tents had been removed to the new camp near the hacienda. A great quantity of débris was littered all over the enclosure. Tools, barrows, fragments of boxes that had been broken open; the Chief's safe, which, having been rifled, had been left standing as too cumbersome for removal: these relics of the raid filled Will with indignation. He had returned the knife to Azito, and being unarmed, he picked up a crowbar to serve as a weapon in case of emergency, and told José to do the same. Then, descending the embankment, all three hurried towards the river.

Just before they reached it, Will suddenly remembered that the supply of petrol on board was running short when he made his last trip. This was a very serious matter. There was no chance of his carrying out his plan without an adequate quantity of petrol. There had been plenty in a godown in the camp, it having been used for driving a small electric engine as well as the hydroplane. Had the cans been carried off with the other stores to the new camp? If so, the game was up. But Will hoped that the rebels had not thought them worth removing. The petrol would be of no use to an army in the field; they were not near a town where it might be turned into money: the chief danger was that Machado, who had clearly thought of making use of the hydroplane, would not have neglected to furnish himself with the necessary fuel. Will wished that he had thought of reassuring himself on this all-important point before leaving the camp; but being now so near the recess in which the hydroplane was laid up, he decided to make sure first that the vessel was still where he had left it.

Having come now into the wood, the natives were again afraid of encountering danger in the shape of reptiles or wild beasts. Fortunately Will had some matches in his pocket. He got Azito and José to collect some dry grass and twist it up into a couple of rough torches, and setting light to one of these they hurried to the bank above the recess. The wood was so thick and the enemy's camp so far away that there was no danger of the light being seen. Kindling the second torch, Will dropped the first into the water. The glare caused a great commotion among the inhabitants; he saw frogs hopping about in all directions, and eels darting away towards the river. At the further end of the recess, just beyond the stern of the hydroplane, a cayman slipped off the bank into the water and swam away. A cursory inspection of the vessel assured Will that it had not been tampered with.

Relieved on this score, he determined to return at once to the old camp and make a search for the petrol.

They lighted their way back through the wood, but extinguished the torch before emerging into the open. Then, aided by the rays of the rising moon, they groped towards the godown, a temporary wooden hut, in which the petrol with other stores had been kept. Just in front of the door was a petrol can, which Will proved by shaking it to be half empty. Apparently the rebels had been examining the contents and left it as worthless to them. Within the hut stood two cans which had not been touched. All cause for anxiety was removed.

Will ordered the two men to carry the cans down to the hydroplane. On the Orinoco petrol was a commodity hard to come by, and though he would rather not have loaded his light craft with more than was immediately needed, he thought it advisable to take all that he had while there was opportunity. The cans were so heavy that only one could be carried at a time. When they came to the wood Will preceded the two men with a torch, at a safe distance. On his second return to the camp he sought everywhere in the hope of finding food; but all the useful stores had been removed, and he had to resign himself to the prospect of fasting until he reached Santa Marta.

It was three o'clock in the morning before Will had overhauled and oiled the machinery and got the hydroplane ready for starting. He had five hours before the train conveying General Carabaño and his troops would leave, and since the hydroplane at full speed would travel faster than the train, he would have had no anxiety about reaching Santa Marta first if he could have gone at full speed all the way. But the distance to the junction was not only twenty miles farther by water than by rail: for the first seven or eight miles he would have to go very slowly, because it would be impossible to make pace in the darkness on the narrow, shallow stream that ran past the hacienda. There would be the danger of striking snags, and the further danger of the throbbing of the engine being heard in the camp. The second danger was so serious that Will decided to trust to the current alone until he was safely past the rebel army. As soon as he should come into the broader stream, which ran into the Orinoco near the railway junction, he might make full use of his motor; but the rate of the current was probably not more than three miles an hour, so that it might be full daylight before he emerged into the tributary. He would then be only about an hour and a half in advance of the train, a rather narrow margin when the windings of the stream were considered.

At last all was ready. Will had given careful instructions to his companions as to what they were to do. José would remain with him in the stern of the vessel; Azito was to stand as far forward as possible, holding a pole in readiness to fend off obstructions. While they were going slowly he could take up his position at the extreme forepart of the screen, but when it was necessary to make the

vessel "plane"--that is, rise out of the water and skim along the surface, which was its special function--he would have to draw back, so that his weight should not interfere with the planing. José was to be ready to oil the engine whenever his master gave the word.

They went on board. Will poled the vessel out of the recess into the little stream, turned her head towards the hacienda, and let her float on the current. For hundreds of yards at a time she moved in inky darkness. The trees on both banks, growing far over the narrow channel, sometimes indeed meeting and forming a tunnel so low that Azito had to stoop, shut out all light of moon and stars. Now and then they came into a bright patch where a gap in the foliage let the moonlight through. At such points Will more than once saw the snout of a cayman; but there was no fear of molestation from any of the wild denizens of the stream: the passage of so strange a monster would imbue them with a wholesome terror.

As they floated slowly down, Will became possessed with a new anxiety. Would Machado suspect that he had got out the hydroplane and be on the watch for him where the canal entered the stream? If that should prove to be the case he might have to run the gauntlet of hundreds of rifles, with the smallest chance of getting through alive. Two considerations gave him hope that he might be spared this ordeal. In the first place, Machado could not know that he had overheard the conversation with General Carabaño, and might suppose that his first move would be an attempt to release his friends. In the second place the Venezuelans are not early risers, and Machado would hardly expect to see the hydroplane before daylight. Of course, with a momentous expedition afoot, the Spanish sluggishness might be temporarily overcome: Will could only hope for the best. If he should be discovered, he determined to set the vessel going at full speed and take his chance.

There were already signs of dawn when the hydroplane came silently to the opening of the canal. The frogs had ceased to croak; but birds were piping in the trees. From the house, too, and the adjacent camp, came sounds of bustle. Preparations were evidently being made for the raid on Bolivar. Will looked round anxiously, half expecting to see, through the haze, hundreds of rifles pointed at him from the bank. But he passed the canal in safety; no one challenged him; and he felt a wonderful relief and hopefulness in the knowledge that the first of the expected dangers had turned out to be a chimera.

Day broke when the vessel had reached a spot about a mile below the hacienda. It was possible now to increase the speed by punting, and Will ordered Azito to employ his pole in this way. After another mile he ventured to set the motor going, at first at low speed, since he was still anxious that the sound of the engine should not be carried to the camp. If the train had started now, it would have reached a point where fifty men with rifles, posted on the bank of the stream, could have made the passage impossible. Will looked at his watch; he had

still nearly an hour to spare, unless General Carabaño had altered his plans.

In a few minutes he came into the stream which ran into the Orinoco nearly fifty miles beyond. Now with a sense of gladness and exhilaration he set the motor at full speed, at the same time ordering Azito to withdraw a few feet towards the stern. In a few seconds the forepart of the vessel lifted; it skimmed along the surface of the stream; and the banks began to whizz past at twenty, thirty, and presently forty miles an hour. At first Azito was somewhat scared at the pace, but after a few minutes he became possessed by the excitement of it, and behaved as if he had been born on a hydroplane. The task Will set him was to keep a good look-out ahead, and give warning by a gesture of either hand of any obstruction in the river, so that Will, who from his position in the stern could not see so well, might steer the vessel, and keep it going at a greater speed than would otherwise have been possible. Will felt that he was running very considerable risks, but speed was of the highest importance. If the train got ahead of him all would be lost: so he cheerfully took chances which he might have shrunk from at another time.

To steer the vessel demanded the utmost watchfulness from both Will and Azito. The river, though broad in parts, was narrow and tortuous at others, and was here and there intersected by rocks and islands, and snags in the shape of waterlogged trees. It was these latter that gave Will the most anxiety. But Azito, who like most Indians was expert in canoeing, and had keen eyesight and a perfect acquaintance with rivers, kept a sharp look-out and proved to have great judgment in detecting snags. With a movement of the right hand or the left he indicated to which side the hydroplane should be steered, and soon Will trusted his guidance implicitly, putting the helm to port or starboard in response to the slightest gesture. Once or twice also, when the rocks were numerous, Azito cried that it would be dangerous to go so fast, and Will immediately slowed down, loth though he was to lose a minute. The engine worked magnificently. The greatest danger to be feared was overheating; but thanks to the ventilators and José's constant attention in oiling, Will found that even after a good spell at full speed there was no sign of a breakdown.

For a long distance they were not in sight of the railway line, which followed a more direct course than the river, and, even when it approached it, was concealed by the thick vegetation on the banks. But they came at length to a more open stretch of country where the line ran for miles at an average distance of less than a quarter-mile from the stream. Here Will, slowing down a little, looked anxiously down the track. There was no sign of the train, which, if it started at the time arranged, was certainly due to pass within half-an-hour or less. Again the river wound away from the line, making a bend which involved probably an extra mile. When they again came in view of the track, Will could see along it for

two or three miles; still there was no sign of the train.

For the next ten miles railway and river ran almost parallel; then the river passed under the bridge carrying the main railway line and joined the Orinoco. Here the branch line saved two or three miles. When the hydroplane came into the broad stream of the Orinoco Will kept as close as possible to the right bank. He was now able to steer a straighter course than on the tributary, and had no need to slacken speed on account of bends. Although he believed that he must be still considerably in advance of the train he kept up full speed for almost an hour more, and then arrived at a point where he could see the little station of Santa Marta nearly a mile away to his right. A narrow canal, just wide enough for the hydroplane, connected the station with the river. It was used for carrying goods to the railway, and had been found very serviceable by Mr. Jackson in his work on the branch line, some of his material having been brought up the river and landed there, thus saving the heavy port dues that would have been demanded in Bolivar itself.

Swinging round into the canal, Will saw that there was no barge either coming or going on it. If there had been, it would have been impossible to run the hydroplane to the station. In a few minutes he brought the vessel to the side of the little wharf below the railway line, and leaving it in charge of the two natives, hurried on by himself.

CHAPTER IX--THE ATTACK ON CIUDAD BOLIVAR

The station of Santa Marta was so small that its only permanent staff was the station-master and a boy, the former being also signalman. Will had seen him several times, and had once before visited the place in his hydroplane, so that the man was not at all surprised when he entered his room.

"Good-morning, señor," said Will, knowing that, however urgent his mission was, the Spaniard would not pardon a neglect of the customary civilities.

"Good-morning, señor," returned the man. "I have easy work to-day. All traffic is suspended. It would give me great pleasure to be permitted to enjoy a

ride in your wonderful vessel."

"I am afraid your information is imperfect, señor. General Carabaño has seized railhead, and is coming before long with a train full of soldiers to make an attack on Bolivar. I have come to warn the Jefe. Will you send a wire at once giving him information?"

"This is surprising, señor. I had word from Bolivar that all traffic was suspended, but no explanation. When will General Carabaño arrive?"

"Really, señor, there is no time for particulars. He is coming now; he is on the way; he may be here at any minute; and he intends to seize the station and flay you alive if you don't join him."

This had the intended effect of overcoming the Spaniard's habitual sluggishness. He quickly flashed a message to Bolivar, giving Will's name (ludicrously misspelt) as his informant. In a few minutes he received an answer, saying that the message was received, and bidding him secure what cash and valuables he had and leave the station. Meanwhile his wife, to whom he had explained the situation, got a few things together, dressed her child, and hurried down to the hydroplane, Will having offered to give them all a passage to the city. It occurred to him that the General would be delayed if the train could be switched into a siding adjoining the station. While the Spaniard was engaged at the telegraph instrument, Will ran on to the line, rushed to the hand-switch, pulled it over, and locked it. Just as he was mounting the platform again, he saw the smoke of the engine about two miles down the line.

"There is no time to be lost, señor," he said, running into the station-master's room. "The train will be here in four minutes or less. There'll be a smash if it runs into the siding at speed, but the engine-driver may see that the lever points the wrong way, and that will give us time to get to the river."

The two hurried out, and boarded the hydroplane, which José and the Indian had turned round within the narrow limits of the canal so that its head pointed towards the Orinoco. Will felt that his little vessel was much overloaded, especially as the forepart could not be used, or planing would be impossible. He set off down the canal, and was half-way to the river before the train arrived. The engine-driver had slackened speed; evidently the General intended to stop and seize the station, and probably also to question the station-master. A shout from the train warned Will that he had been seen, and he smiled to think of Machado's rage and mortification. "He will wish he hadn't said so much to Carabaño," he thought.

The changing of the points escaped the engine-driver's notice until he was nearly on the siding. He jammed on the brakes, but was unable to avoid being switched off the main track; then he had to back out and alter the points. This took three or four minutes, so that by the time the train had started again the hy-

droplane had turned into the Orinoco and was almost level with it. Will felt all the excitement and enjoyment of a race, though he was not now specially concerned to get far ahead of the train: the warning had been given. The train followed the more direct course, and the smoke of the engine was only occasionally visible among the trees. Will, overladen as the little craft was, managed to keep abreast of the train, and so they ran on, neck and neck, until they were within seven or eight miles of Bolivar. Then Will heard a muffled explosion. He guessed what it meant, and found a mile farther on that he was right. One of the arches of a long culvert had been blown up. There was a six or seven-mile march before General Carabaño.

Will pushed on. As he drew nearer to the city he heard the sound of firing. Apparently Colonel Orellana had already developed his attack on the south-east. "He wants to get in first, and turn liberator of the Republic instead of Carabaño," thought Will. In a few minutes he ran the hydroplane alongside of the landing-stage, unchallenged: clearly no attack had been expected on this quarter. He left the vessel in charge of the two natives and hastened along the Calle de Coco with the station-master to seek the Jefe. He had already been introduced to that worthy official; indeed, he had thoroughly enjoyed himself at a ball given by the Jefe during a short stay in the city with Mr. Jackson.

There was a great commotion in the streets. Officers and orderlies were galloping in all directions, troops hastening from one part of the city to another, many of the men being civilians armed for the nonce. Shopkeepers were barricading their windows; peons were throwing barricades across the principal streets; here and there were the inevitable loafers, lolling against the walls and smoking as if all was peaceful and serene. Will hurried along, towards the Alameda, and came to the Town Hall, the portico of which was thronged. He pushed his way in, with the station-master, and sent up his name. He waited for some time; nobody came to fetch him; and in fact, the Jefe was so busily engaged in arranging for the defence of the city that he had scarcely heeded the functionary who informed him of Will's presence. It was doubtful whether his name was properly pronounced. Will was, however, determined to see him. He felt a certain compunction in leaving his friends captive at the hacienda while he occupied himself with the affairs of a State to which he owed nothing. He reflected that if he had lain low until the rebels had started, he might have found an opportunity of releasing them--unless perchance General Carabaño had brought them with him. Certainly he owed it to them to make an immediate application to the Jefe on their behalf.

At last he grew impatient, and asked a passing official whether he could not go up to the Jefe.

"His Excellency is too much engaged to give audience, señor," was the reply, and the man passed on without waiting for more.

Suddenly remembrance came to Will.

"Isn't your aunt's uncle engaged in the administration?" he asked the station-master.

"My mother's cousin, señor. I was not aware that you knew it."

"Then please will you send a message to your mother's cousin and see whether he cannot bring us to the Jefe," said Will, stifling a temptation to shake the man.

"But he is a high official, señor; he may be displeased."

"Good heavens! Don't you see it's the chance of your life! You are the man who sent the warning telegram from Santa Marta. Get your mother's cousin to take you to the Jefe: he may make you superintendent of the line."

This vision of glory was sufficiently dazzling to overcome the station-master's reluctance to trouble his relative. Mentioning the official's name, he was led along a corridor and ushered into his presence. A few words explained his errand; then the assistant secretary said he would certainly introduce him to the Jefe as the man whose timely warning had been so valuable. Will accompanied them to the room in which the Jefe sat, among a throng of officers. The assistant secretary presented his relative, magnifying his promptitude and zeal for the State. The Jefe embraced him: then, recognizing Will, gave him a finger.

"The Republic thanks you, señor," he said to the station-master; "the President will reward you. Your warning gave us time to blow up the culvert, and if I can hold the rebel Colonel Orellana at bay, I may be able to vanquish General Carabaño himself. By a malign stroke of fate, scarcely an hour before I received your message, three hundred of my best troops left by steamer for Caracas, sadly reducing my garrison."

"Did you not receive a telegram from Caracas ordering the dispatch of these reinforcements, Excellency?" asked Will.

"That is true, señor," replied the Jefe, with a look of surprise.

"The order was fabricated, Excellency," said Will at once. "It was part of General Carabaño's plan, managed with the connivance of one of your telegraph staff. His name is--let me think: Perugia--no, Pereira."

"Do you say so, señor?" cried the Jefe, springing up in agitation. "How do you know it?"

"I overheard a conversation between General Carabaño and my Company's telegraphist, who has joined the rebels."

"Caramba! could anything be more unfortunate--or more atrocious! Captain Guzman, be so good as to have this Pereira instantly arrested. Would that I could recall the troops! But by this time they are twelve miles down-stream."

An idea struck Will.

"I have my hydroplane at the quay, Excellency," he said, "and if the steamer

left only an hour ago I can easily overtake it if you will give me an order recalling the troops. In less than three hours they will be at your Excellency's disposal."

The Jefe grasped both his hands and shook them warmly.

"I cannot sufficiently thank you, señor. You will do the State a great service. If the troops return within that time they will be here almost as soon as General Carabaño; it may be our salvation. Do not delay, I beg you."

"I must have a written order, Excellency."

"Assuredly. Señor Crespo" (addressing the assistant secretary), "kindly make out the order for my signature at once."

He turned to speak to his officers. The station-master, finding himself forgotten, stood looking very ill at ease. In a few moments the order was signed, and Will took his leave. Hurrying through the streets, he remembered that he was hungry and stopped at a shop to buy bread and cheese. But putting his hand into his pocket for the money, he discovered that he was without a single peseta.

"I came away in a hurry," he said to the scowling shopkeeper. "Look, here is an order signed by the Jefe; my mission is urgent, I will pay you when I get back, at the offices of the British Asphalt Company of Guayana."

"Very well, señor," said the man, to whom the name of the Company was well known: and Will hurried off, carrying enough food to provide himself and his two companions with a substantial meal.

Five minutes afterwards he sprang on board the hydroplane, cast off, and set her going at full speed. The current was with him, and the vessel whizzed along at forty knots, Azito standing with his pole a few feet from the wind screen, holding in his left hand a hunch of bread from which he took a bite occasionally. Will employed his left hand in the same way, steering with the right.

Caracas, he knew, was several hundreds of miles distant from Ciudad Bolivar by water. The steamer would run with the tide to the mouth of the river, or strike out by one of its arms to the sea, and then follow the coast-line. Will knew that he could overtake it long before it reached the mouth. Indeed, in less than half-an-hour Azito reported that he saw its smoke in the distance. Five minutes afterwards it was clearly visible as a spot on the river's broad expanse, and in yet another five minutes the hydroplane was alongside, Will shouting to the crowded deck that he had a message of recall from the Jefe. The steamer slowed down and stopped: Will clambered on board and handed the order to the officer in command. The vessel was instantly put about; the engines were forced to their utmost, and huge volumes of black smoke poured from the funnels, the hydroplane being made fast with a rope and towed.

The steamer was now moving against the current, and it seemed to Will to go at a snail's pace in comparison with the hydroplane. He became so bored with the slow progress and the officer's questions about his vessel that he made up his

mind to quit the steamer and hasten back in advance, to inform the Jefe that the troops were on the way to his relief. He called to José to start the motor and drive the hydroplane alongside, slipped over by means of a rope, and was soon careering ahead of the steamer at three times its speed.

When he arrived within a few miles of the city he heard heavy firing, and as he drew nearer he recognized that the attack was being pressed in two quarters. Evidently General Carabaño had made a very rapid march from the broken culvert. On reaching the quay, he left José and Azito in charge of the hydroplane as before, and hurried along the deserted streets to the Town Hall. The Jefe was absent. He had taken the command against General Carabaño on the south-west, while Captain Guzman was engaged with Colonel Orellana on the south-east. Will hastened on to find the Jefe. He discovered him a short distance south of the town, on rising ground, his front protected by the walls of two or three gardens.

The Jefe was decidedly flurried. He had only three or four hundred men against a force which he estimated to number nearly eight hundred. Will wondered how so many had been squeezed into the train. They must have been packed like sardines. Three guns had been drawn to the spot and unlimbered behind the walls; but the Jefe, when Will told him that the steamer was coming down at full speed, explained with much vehemence that when his artillerymen tried to fire the guns they found that the powder was mixed with sand. Will was not surprised. Some official had no doubt made a little fortune out of the contract.

General Carabaño's attack had been twice rolled back, but he had now divided his force into two portions. One threatened the front of the Jefe's position, from the reverse slope of a hill about a quarter of a mile distant; the other was working through a small wood to the west, with the evident intention of taking the position in flank. Indeed, just after Will arrived, an enfilading fire broke out on the right, and began to thin the ranks of the men holding the gardens, for the wood through which the enemy was approaching was at a somewhat higher level, so that the defenders lost the protection of the wall running at right angles to their front. The position was already no longer tenable, and the Jefe, who had no great confidence in his men's steadiness, began to withdraw them by twenties behind barricades thrown up at the end of two streets leading towards the middle of the city. The retirement was hailed with loud shouts by the enemy, who, emboldened by their success, came pouring out of the wood, pressing the Government troops hard. The last of these to leave the gardens were closely followed by the main body of the enemy under General Carabaño himself. They came yelling forward right up to the barricades. Then, however, they were met by a galling fire from the men already in position; and the General's voice could be heard ordering them to scatter and take refuge in the gardens which had lately sheltered their opponents.

It was obvious that the barricades could not be taken by direct assault with-

out heavy loss, but the General was equal to the difficulty. While his men kept up a dropping fire from the garden, the flanking force, under Captain Espejo, skirmishing along under cover of broken country, gained a point some hundred yards beyond the barricades, and then, swinging to their right, charged through a cross lane, a movement which threatened the rear of the defenders and placed them between two fires. The Jefe saw his peril in time, and withdrew his men hurriedly from the barricade, occupying houses commanding the intersection of the streets with the lane.

He had barely completed this operation when he saw his mistake. He was in a trap. His force was no longer mobile. The enemy, protected by the barricades which he himself had raised, could prevent him from leaving the houses, while he, though the buildings to some extent commanded the barricades, was quite unable to bring to bear upon the enemy a fire destructive enough to drive them away. General Carabaño's intentions were soon clear. He ordered up Captain Espejo, and left him to hold the Jefe in check, while preparing himself to detach the rest of his men and press on by a flank march towards the centre of the city, which was practically undefended. This division of his force, which would have been hazardous in face of superior numbers, was perfectly safe in the unfortunate situation in which the Jefe was placed.

During these exciting moments Will had remained with the Jefe. That poor harassed man was in great distress of mind at having allowed himself thus to be cut off.

"How long will the steamer be?" he asked Will anxiously, standing at a window.

"It can't be far off, Excellency," replied Will. "Shall I go and hurry up the reinforcements?"

"It is a generous offer, señor, but impossible to carry out. You would certainly be shot."

"I am not so sure, Excellency. Captain Espejo's men are all beyond the barricades: the General is now some distance away; if you pour in a hot fire on the barricades when I slip out I think I might escape."

"You are a stranger, señor. You have no reason to imperil your life in our unhappy cause."

"But the very existence of my Company depends on your crushing General Carabaño, Excellency. I am willing to take the risk."

"I can say no more, señor. Give me a signal when you reach the door and I will do my best for you."

Will instantly ran down the stairs. He stood at the door for a moment to make sure that the street to the right was clear; then, shouting to the Jefe, he sprinted away. Instantly there was a rattle of musketry from the windows above.

Will ran a few yards up the street, one or two bullets whizzing perilously close, then darted into an alley on his right and made at full speed towards the river.

The city seemed to be deserted. All the civilians had barricaded themselves in their houses. When Will reached the quay, he saw the smoke of the steamer about a mile away. Springing into the hydroplane, he started it down-stream, and on meeting the vessel, swung round and explained in a few hurried sentences to the officer in command what was happening. The officer, who appeared to be a capable soldier, was alive to the situation. If General Carabaño swooped down on the rear of Captain Guzman's force, engaged in an unequal struggle with Colonel Orellana in the south-east of the city, he might easily crush the defence in that quarter. He could then join hands with Captain Espejo and sweep the city from end to end. It was obviously the first duty of the reinforcements to save the garrison on the southeast from being crushed, and there was no time to be lost.

Accordingly the steamer went on until it reached the quay. The troops were landed, hastily formed up, and led up the steep hill streets towards the danger point, from which the sound of continuous firing, now much louder than when Will came through the city, showed that Captain Guzman was being hard pressed.

The reinforcements had barely begun the advance when a loud outburst of firing was heard, apparently not more than a few hundred yards away. There could be no doubt that General Carabaño had crossed the city and was now falling on the rear of the garrison. Will had had no military training or experience, but he realized how critical the situation was. If Captain Guzman's defence was broken, it was doubtful whether, even with the aid of the reinforcements, the city could be saved. The officer, Colonel Blanco, ordered his men to double and to refrain from shouting.

"Go back, señor," he cried to Will: "you will be in danger."

"Not a bit of it," replied Will, in the grip of intense excitement.

He ran along beside the Colonel, wishing that he had had the forethought to borrow a rifle before he left the Jefe. He did not pause to consider that he was properly a non-combatant; he was in fact too much excited to think of his own position at all.

The head of the little column soon came in view of a large plaza, so full of smoke that it was impossible to see whether the men firing were friends or foes. But in a few moments Will caught sight of a number of Indians, wearing green feathers, swarming out of one of the streets opening on the plaza.

"They are General Carabaño's bloodhounds," cried Will.

"Charge!" shouted the Colonel.

With a great shout the men sprang impetuously forward. Behind the Indians Will saw General Carabaño's towering form. He was evidently taken by surprise at the sudden appearance of a force from an unexpected quarter; but he

called to his men to swing round, and with wild cries, in no order, Indians and Venezuelans charged straight for the head of the column. There was no time to fire. The two bodies came together with a shock, and then began a desperate hand to hand fight in which bayonets, clubbed rifles, lances, machetes, swords, revolvers, all played a part.

Will began to wish he had not been so impetuous. He was in the thick of it now, pressed upon so closely that it was impossible to escape from the mellay. For some minutes he dodged this way and that, with no other thought than to avoid the enemy's weapons. He was in some measure protected by the very denseness of the struggling mass, which was jammed so tight that there was little room for wielding arms of any kind. But presently, as the swaying throng thinned a little, a furious llanero lunged at him with his bayonet. It shaved his shoulder almost by a hair's-breadth, only missing his chest because the man stumbled over one of Blanco's soldiers who had just fallen. Will's blood was up. Before the llanero recovered his footing, Will let drive at him with his right fist, at the same time gripping his rifle by the barrel with the left. A vigorous wrench forced it from the man's hand. Will had just time to change it to his right hand when two yelling Indians sprang at him with machetes. He parried the stroke of one, catching it on the barrel, and dropped on his knee, in the nick of time to evade a sweeping blow from the weapon of the other, which shaved the top clean off his sun-helmet.

"Bravo!" shouted Colonel Blanco, felling the first man with his revolver. Then Will, springing up as the second Indian stumbled past him, brought the stock of the rifle down on the man's head, and he fell like a log.

By this time the rest of Colonel Blanco's column had forced its way into the plaza and closed round the surging mass of men. Their rifles were loaded; they fired one volley into the rear ranks of the enemy, careful not to hit their friends; then they too clubbed their rifles and joined doughtily in the fray. They were fresh; General Carabaño's men were weary with their forced march and the ensuing struggle. The General's loud voice could be heard above the din, shouting to his men to reform their ranks. But he might as well have harangued a flock of sheep. Nor was there more order in Colonel Blanco's force. There was not so much method in the fighting as in a Rugby scrimmage.

Numbers began to tell. There were signs of wavering among the enemy. Colonel Blanco seized the moment to shout to his men to press home the charge. Some of the Indians were seen making across the plaza, almost sweeping the General off his feet. He slashed at them as they passed, commanding them to stand; but his men were falling back; Colonel Blanco had succeeded in forming a line; and the General, recognizing that the game was up, ordered the retreat. Will was amazed to see how fast so big a man could run. Colonel Blanco set off at the head of his men in pursuit, but the enemy scattered, running like hares into the vari-

ous streets on the south side of the plaza. Several were overtaken and cut down, but the remainder made good their escape and fled from the city into the open country.

There were still sounds of firing to the southeast, and Colonel Blanco swung his column round to go to the relief of Captain Guzman. He reached him at a moment when his men, exhausted with their long struggle, were giving way before the superior numbers of Colonel Orellana. The sudden appearance of the reinforcements turned the tide. Seeing Government troops instead of those of General Carabaño, which he had expected, Colonel Orellana recognized that their plan had in some way miscarried, and drew off his men in good order. Colonel Blanco deemed it inadvisable to pursue until he had assured himself of the relinquishment of the attack on the Jefe. Hurrying back across the city, he found that Captain Espejo had learnt of his chief's discomfiture, and was already in full flight. The raid had failed utterly; and Colonel Blanco, joining hands with the Jefe, declared that the revolution was snuffed out.

CHAPTER X--SCOUTING

The guest of honour at the Jefe's banquet that evening was not the station-master of Santa Marta, who, it is to be feared, was left out in the cold, but William Pentelow. His health was drunk (in very bad wine), and he had to listen, as comfortably as he could, to some very high-flown speeches, in which he was hailed as the true Liberator of Venezuela. Will, who was a modest fellow, took all this for what it was worth, which, he was inclined to think, was very little.

The truth is that he was not in the mood for junketing. Before the banquet the Jefe had granted him a private audience, and he related full particulars of what had happened at railhead. He ended by asking the Jefe to use his influence and authority to procure the liberation of Mr. Jackson and his subordinates. The Jefe was very sympathetic, but confessed frankly that he saw no present means of helping the Englishmen.

"It is most distressing, señor," he said, "but you see my unfortunate position. I am not strong enough to follow up the defeated rebels. I cannot leave the city totally unguarded, and my whole force is inferior in numbers to those

of General Carabaño and Colonel Orellana. I can expect no help from Caracas at present, and, as you are doubtless aware, there are no garrisons in the smaller towns touched by the railway. Besides, I have no doubt that General Carabaño has entrained his men, and returned to the place from which he started, and since the culvert is broken, it is impossible to follow him up by train. As soon as the revolt in Valencia is suppressed, the President will certainly take strong measures against General Carabaño, who until then must, I fear, be left unmolested. A mere remonstrance with him on the treatment of your colleagues, unbacked by force, would be futile. I will certainly telegraph to Caracas, giving the particulars I have learnt from you, and asking for instructions; but I do not expect that anything practical will come of it immediately. At present I can only hold this city for the Government. If I may counsel you, I say, remain here for the present. I do not anticipate that your friends will suffer personal harm; General Carabano will certainly have a wholesome respect for the far-reaching arm of your great country. I shall not fail to represent your distinguished services in the highest quarters, and without doubt the President will know how to recognize them adequately. In the meantime I shall be honoured by your presence at the banquet I am giving to-night in celebration of our victory."

This was very cold comfort; but Will was not unreasonable, and on reflection he acknowledged that the Jefe could not very well take any active steps on behalf of his friends. He decided at any rate to wait until an answer had been received from Caracas, which might be expected during the following day.

Scouts who had been sent out to watch the retreating columns reported that the retirement was definitive. Colonel Orellana had marched southward round the swamps, while General Carabaño had entrained his men beyond the culvert and started down the line, presumably to return to his camp at De Mello's hacienda.

Next morning the Jefe decided to send a portion of his troops by steamer to the junction, to capture the station staff, who had clearly espoused the rebels' cause. When Colonel Blanco returned in the evening, he reported that he had found the station deserted. Since the destruction of the culvert six miles west of Bolivar had rendered the line useless at present for Government troops, the Colonel had thought it wise to prevent General Carabaño from attempting another dash on the city. Accordingly he had torn up a hundred yards of the track on this side of the junction. This left the rebels in possession of the branch line, which would, however, be of little use to them. The Colonel had not broken the telegraph wires. The traitor Pereira in Bolivar had been flung into jail, so that there was no danger of further mischief concerted between him and his friend Machado.

Meanwhile Will had spent an unhappy day. Some of the younger officers

seemed disposed to continue indefinitely the revellings of the previous night, and he had great difficulty in excusing himself from participation in them without appearing discourteous. He took the opportunity of paying a visit to the offices of the Company. The agent, an Englishman, was greatly distressed at what had occurred, and cabled information to the head offices in London, leaving it to the directors to make representations to the Foreign Office. He advanced a quarter's salary to Will, who bought a revolver and a supply of petrol, together with a considerable quantity of food which he stored in the hydroplane.

An hour before Colonel Blanco's return from the junction, the Jefe sent for Will.

"I have disagreeable news for you, señor," he said. "This afternoon I received a telegram from General Carabaño saying that your superior, having taken arms against the Liberator, is now held to ransom. He threatens that unless he receives within three days 60,000 pesos for Señor Jackson and 12,000 for each of his subordinates they will be shot."

Will gasped. He knew without telling that to raise so large a sum as £7,000 would be impossible.

"I telegraphed this demand to Caracas, having already informed the President of what you told me yesterday," continued the Jefe. "I have his reply here. He says that he deeply regrets the outrage to which your friends have been subjected, but the permanent interests of your Company will be better served by strengthening my position here than by attempting a rescue with a totally inadequate force. He adds that the payment of a ransom is out of the question. It would merely strengthen General Carabaño's position, and his demand must be resisted on public grounds ay in the highest degree dangerous."

"Surely he will not allow three inoffensive Englishmen to be shot," exclaimed Will, indignantly.

"It is deplorable," replied the Jefe, "but what can be done? General Carabaño will hesitate before taking so extreme a step, which would utterly ruin any chance he may have of usurping authority, even if he could overcome us by force of arms."

"I am not so sure of that," said Will bitterly. "From what I have seen and heard of the General I believe him to be utterly unscrupulous and capable of any atrocity, to satisfy his spite if for no other reason, for you remember, Excellency, that it was my Chief's firmness that prevented him from vastly increasing his resources."

"Señor Jackson indeed merits the thanks of the Republic, señor, and I am greatly concerned at his unfortunate position. But, as you see, I am helpless, and I can only hope that General Carabaño will be restrained by considerations of prudence from committing what would undoubtedly be a most heinous crime."

Will saw that, had he been in the Governor's place, he could hardly have

done otherwise. But though official action was impossible, he felt that he could not himself remain securely in Bolivar while his friends were in dire peril. He was at a loss to think of any effectual means of helping them, but he could at least return to the hacienda on the chance, small though it must be, of intervening in their behalf. It flashed upon him--and the thought was a ray of hope--that the General had possibly been bluffing, and that the Englishmen were no longer his prisoners. He could not have left a large guard over them; they might have escaped. At any rate, Will decided that he must return at once and see for himself how matters stood.

Twenty minutes after his interview with the Jefe he was again on board the hydroplane with José and Azito. A few miles up the river he met Colonel Blanco's steamer returning, and learnt what had been done at the junction. Then he set off again, hoping to reach the neighbourhood of the hacienda soon after dark. But reflecting that his supply of petrol was limited, and he would have no chance of replenishing it, he contented himself with an average speed of some twenty knots, and it was dark before he reached the junction. Just at this time it happened that something went wrong with the engine, and since he did not care to risk an absolute breakdown, and could not discover the defect in the darkness, he felt it necessary to lie up until morning. Accordingly he ran the vessel into a small secluded creek, well sheltered by trees, and made his way with José and the Indian to the deserted station, where they ate a meal and fixed their quarters for the night, each taking a turn to watch.

As soon as it was light they returned to the hydroplane. To repair the defect was the work of half-an-hour. They were eating their breakfast on board the vessel when Azito declared that he heard a train approaching. The creek was so well screened by the foliage that there was no fear of their being seen from the railway line; but it was possible to observe through the leaves what happened when the train drew level. It consisted of three trucks filled with men, and Will felt sure he saw the burly form of Captain Espejo standing beside the engine-driver on his cab. He wondered whether they had got wind of the coming of the hydroplane, and had come to intercept it. This seemed very unlikely, for the news would not have reached them by telegraph now that Pereira had been removed and the staff at the junction had decamped. True, the hydroplane had been seen as it passed river-side villages, and it had met and overtaken several craft on the way--barges, skiffs, and Indian canoes. But it had outstripped all vessels going in the same direction, and it must have been impossible for any of their occupants to have given information to the rebels. A more reasonable explanation was that they had heard of the visit of Colonel Blanco, and Captain Espejo had come to discover what had happened at the junction, and whether any movement was being made from Bolivar. General Carabaño was probably unaware of the exact

strength of the reinforcements to which he owed his defeat, and would naturally be somewhat nervous lest he should be followed up.

The train came to a standstill where the line had been torn up. Captain Espejo descended from the engine and some of his men from the trucks, and they walked along the track and into the station. Will had already decided that it would be inadvisable to continue his journey until the approach of evening. He chafed at the delay, but there would be too great a risk of being seen, or of the throbbing of the engine being heard, to venture further in the daylight, especially as the line was being used. After the train had returned, therefore--the engine running backwards, the siding at the station having been destroyed--he settled himself in the boat to make up for the broken sleep of the night.

When he awoke, he thought over what was before him. It was impossible to prepare a definite plan of operations. His first object must be to discover whether the three Englishmen were still in the camp, and still imprisoned in the stables. This seemed to him unlikely. His own escape would probably have led to a change of quarters, unless indeed the General had adopted the precaution of patrolling all sides of the stables to prevent a repetition of Will's exploit. He thought with compunction of the additional rigours the prisoners might have had to suffer through him. What he should do when he had discovered their whereabouts must be left to circumstances. He would only have a little more than one clear day to effect their release before the period named by General Carabaño expired, and he fretted a good deal as he thought of the possibility that all his efforts might fail.

After a tedious and anxious day, he ventured to set off a little before dusk. It was dark when he came into the stream running past the hacienda. Finding that the wind was blowing strongly from the direction of the hacienda, he continued to use the engine for a time, not, of course, planing, but contenting himself with a bare two or three knots. When this was no longer safe, he stopped the engine and with Azito's assistance began to pole the vessel up-stream. It was slow and fatiguing work. But there was no help for it. The hydroplane was too valuable an accessory to be left where it might be discovered. The first necessity was to lay it up in security. Then they might go ashore feeling confident that, however protracted their absence might be, the vessel would be safe and always available.

As it passed within sight of the hacienda and the camp Will saw lights, and suspected from their position that the camp had been shifted. He would have liked to land and steal up to the stables; Azito offered to do so: but Will, after a little hesitation, stuck to his resolution to risk nothing until the hydroplane was in safety. It was fully four hours before he reached the hollow in the bank. Once or twice in the darkness the vessel ran aground, and the fear of lurking caymans made them careful how they moved to get her off. When, shortly after one o'clock, she was at last moored in the recess, Will was tired out. He was five miles from

the hacienda: by the time he could reach it there would only be two or three hours of darkness before day broke. It would be difficult enough to make any discovery at all in the darkness: how much more difficult when time was limited! In spite of the further delay involved, Will thought it wise to rest for the remainder of the night, and to start fresh next morning on whatever course then offered itself.

Will had never before spent a night in the hydroplane. Owing perhaps to his fatigue and his anxieties he felt a little reluctant to do so now, for though the water in the recess was very shallow, there was a possibility that a cayman might wander in from the stream, a prospect not to be thought of without shuddering. Azito and the negro refused point-blank to sleep in the vessel. The wood had its perils, but they preferred to rest in a tree. To guard against any danger for himself Will hit on the plan of tying a string across the entrance of the recess about a foot above the surface of the water. An empty petrol can was attached to one end of this, and so carefully balanced that the least touch on the string would cause it to fall against the bank. The sound would, he hoped, not only give him warning, but scare away any unwelcome visitor. However, the night passed without disturbance, and Will, when he awoke, was ready for anything the day might bring forth.

It was the third day, the last, of the time allowed by General Carabaño for the ransom of his prisoners. Anything that could be done for them must be done at once.

"You and I will go to the hacienda," said Will to the Indian, "and see if we can find out where the señores are."

"I go alone, señor," replied Azito. "I can move as quietly as a snake. No one will hear me. Was it not I that made the hole in the wall? Let the señor stay here until I bring him word."

Anxious and impatient though he was, Will had to confess to himself that Azito's suggestion was reasonable. The Indian was accustomed to the woods: he might evade observation by a hundred artifices of which Will was ignorant. In any case one would go more safely than two.

"Very well," said Will. "Be as quick as you can."

The Indian slipped noiselessly away. Will spent the first part of the morning in cleaning the engine. When this was done he moved restlessly about among the trees, worried because he could do nothing, nor even form any plans until he had more information. He watched the bright-coloured birds flitting among the foliage, caught a tree frog, and examined it with a naturalist's curiosity, followed a cayman as it hunted for food along the bank; but all this palled upon him after a time, and as hour after hour passed, and Azito did not return, he became more and more uneasy. What had happened to the man? Had he fallen into the clutches of his old master? At the best he would be unmercifully thrashed; and if by any

chance Captain Espejo had learnt of his association with the Englishmen, as he might do from one of the railway peons who had been impressed, Will trembled for the poor Indian's fate.

As the sun rose higher, it became oppressively hot in the moist atmosphere of the wood. At noon Will and José ate a simple dinner; then the former lay down in the hydroplane to snatch a nap. But the air of the recess was so stuffy, and insects bit him so ferociously, that at last he could endure his inactivity no longer. José had been several times to the edge of the wood to watch for Azito's return. When he came back after one of these excursions, and reported that there was still no sign of him, Will sprang up.

"I am going after him, José," he said. "You stay here and watch the boat. Do not leave it until I come."

He climbed up the bank and set off through the wood. If he went straight through it, he would emerge almost within bowshot of the hacienda. It occurred to him that he would run less risk if he came down on the camp from the opposite side rather than from the river front. Accordingly he struck off to the right, and presently reached the margin of the wood near the deserted railway camp. Looking around to make sure that no one was in sight, he ran across the open space, still littered with the débris of the camp, and crawled over the embankment. A few hundred yards on the other side of this was a long stretch of forest. He entered this, and then turning to the left, hurried on as fast as he could through the clinging tangled undergrowth. Here and there the trees thinned and he bent low so that his form should not show above the vegetation. Sometimes too he came to an expanse of bare rising ground, and had to go a long way round to avoid it. But the embankment always served as a screen, and about three o'clock he arrived at a point where he could hear the distant sounds of the camp and knew that he was coming within reach of danger.

Leaving the wood, he climbed the embankment, and lay down at the top to view the camp. He saw that, as he had guessed when passing it on the stream, it had been removed, and was now established nearly half-a-mile away in the grounds of the hacienda, which the tents practically encircled. He surmised that his escape from the stables had made General Carabaño anxious about his own safety. If a man could get out, a man could get in, and the General had many enemies. Difficult as access had been before, it was now immeasurably more difficult, and Will felt with a sinking heart that his friends' plight was even more serious than he had believed.

He was still lying on the embankment, wondering what had become of Azito, and how he was to do anything for the prisoners, when he suddenly became aware that he was not alone. He had heard no sound except the distant hum from the camp. Turning quickly and whipping out his revolver, but still having the

prudence not to rise to his feet, he was confronted by Azito himself, who had crawled up to his side. He was conscious now that his heart was thumping wildly against his ribs.

"I am here, señor," whispered the Indian, unnecessarily.

The two quickly slid down the embankment and entered the wood.

"I had given you up," said Will breathlessly. "What have you done?"

The Indian's story was a very simple and natural one, and Will saw that his anxiety had been quite baseless. Azito had approached to within a quarter-mile of the hacienda, and then found himself checked. The camp was astir; sentries were placed at several points of its circuit; it was impossible to get in undetected. There was no alternative but to wait. Will could imagine Azito sitting with the stolid patience of the Indian, clasping his knees, indifferent to the passage of time. His opportunity came at noon, when, after the midday meal, everybody but the sentries retired for a siesta, and even they were drowsy. Slipping round the camp, he wormed his way through the undergrowth to the back of the stables. The hole in the wall had not been filled up. There was no sound from within. Wriggling through the hole, he found that the stables were deserted. The door was open. All was quiet before the hacienda. He peeped round to the right. No sentry was posted at the new stables. Evidently the prisoners had not been transferred to them. It was impossible to search for them through the camp. Stealthily he made his way back as he had come, and going a long way round, crossed the embankment and drew near to the camp again, to view it from the other side. There was nothing to indicate the whereabouts of the prisoners.

"Did you see any one you knew?" asked Will.

"Señor Machado, señor. I saw him go in and out of the house. Once he came out with General Carabaño."

"Are there any special guards set in the camp itself?"

"None, señor, except the sentry at the door. He was asleep against the wall when I looked out from the stables."

The absence of special guards in the camp or at the house seemed to indicate that the prisoners had been removed elsewhere. A horrible fear that they had already been shot seized upon Will. For a moment he shuddered in a cold sweat of doubt and dread. But then he remembered that the period of grace had not yet expired. Furthermore, the prisoners would be more valuable alive than dead. While they still lived there was a chance of their being ransomed. General Carabano would surely, as the Jefe had suggested, hesitate to involve himself in serious complications with the British Government. A revolutionary leader can hardly play the remorseless tyrant until success has placed him beyond criticism.

But if the prisoners, then, were still alive, as seemed probable, where were they? So far as Will knew, there was no place in the immediate neighbourhood to

which they could have been taken. He was at a loss how to make any discovery on this matter without revealing his presence to the enemy. The camp was astir. To enter it now was impossible. It seemed that the only thing to do was to return to the recess, and remain there until night, trying meanwhile to think out some course of action.

Before he left, however, he determined to climb the embankment once more for a final look round. Choosing for his ascent a spot a little nearer to the camp, on gaining the top he caught sight of the small wooden cabin which had been erected for the telegraphic apparatus. Before, it was concealed from him by a row of bushes. For a moment he wondered whether the prisoners had been locked up there, but the notion was negatived immediately by the absence of a sentry. And then he laughed inwardly at the idea of the prisoners being within reach of Machado. The telegraphist would hardly feel safe to perform his duties, if they were still required of him, with O'Connor near at hand, even though he was bound.

There was nothing to be gained by remaining longer, so Will, very despondent, made his way back with Azito through the wood to the recess in the bank. José reported that nothing had happened during their absence. They all had a meal; then Will went up the bank and strolled along where the vegetation did not impede walking, gloomily pondering his apparent helplessness.

Suddenly he heard a slight warning sound from Azito. He stepped hastily back among the trees, and looked up-stream, the direction in which the Indian was pointing. Coming round a bend some distance away was an object that looked like a cage or a basket. There was a man in it, standing in the middle, steering the strange vessel with a short pole as it drifted down the stream. Azito declared that he was a white man. Will gazed at him searchingly; then almost shouted for joy. The newcomer was Joe Ruggles.

CHAPTER XI--A LEAP IN THE DARK

When Ruggles came within a few yards of the spot where the two watchers stood, Will softly hailed him. He looked round in alarm, and made as though to beat a summary retreat. Then, lifting his eyes and seeing Will among the trees, he steered towards the bank, saying--

"It's you, is it? I say, do you happen to have a glass of beer?"

"No, I haven't."

"Perhaps it's as well, but I am powerful dry."

"I say, I am awfully glad to see you. Hold on! I'll come down and show you the entrance to my garage. Are the others safe too?"

"Not that I know of. I wish they were. Where have you been skylarking?"

"Skylarking! Good heavens! I've been worried out of my life. I'll tell you all about it, but first tell me where the others are, and how you came here."

The raft was drawn into the recess, and Ruggles was soon seated beside Will in the hydroplane, eating bread and cheese, and sighing for his one glass of beer and a pipe to follow.

"Not but what it's as well to do without 'em," he said. "If I began life over again I'd avoid beer and tobacco; at least, I would if I could. Well, the morning after you went there was a rare shindy, as you may imagine, when they found your manger empty. They hauled us out and questioned us, and General Carabaño looked as if he could have made a meal of us. O'Connor and I were as much surprised as he was, and wild with the Chief for not telling us. However, the General got nothing out of us, and within an hour we were put on horses and marched up-country with a strong escort of those ruffians. Our hands were tied behind us, and our horses were led, the escort being mounted too.

"I made out from what some of 'em said that their General was going to make a dash on Bolivar, and didn't think we'd be safe at the hacienda. He wanted all his men for the raid, you see, and intended to leave only a few peons to look

after the camp and the horses. He couldn't trust them, of course, and I reckon we'd have got away pretty soon if he had left us there. I didn't hear where they were taking us, and when I asked the fellow who led my horse, he only grinned at me like an ape."

"O'Connor was mad, no doubt," said Will.

"You'd have thought so, wouldn't you? But he wasn't, a bit; or didn't show it. He tried to crack jokes with his man, and it was amusing, though not as he intended, for, as you know, his Spanish wouldn't cover a half-sheet of note-paper. But all the time I could see he was looking round for a chance of escape. However, I managed it, and so far as I know, he didn't. In my case it was sheer luck. Most of the escort were llaneros, fine fellows, too, as near gentlemen as any Venezuelan can be. But the fellow who tied me up was a bumpkin, who made a bungle of the job. I held my wrists so that by giving them a twist afterwards I could loosen the knots: you know the trick."

"Rather! I should have thought O'Connor would have known it too."

"He may or may not. Anyway, we came to a part where the path had a sheer cliff on the one side and a precipice on the other; a sort of steep dell, you know, overgrown with trees and shrubs. The path was so narrow that we had to go in single file, and, as luck would have it, I came last, except one man riding free behind me. Just as we came to the precipice I kind of saw there might be half a chance, so as my bumpkin drew ahead of me--he'd lengthened the leading-rein--I managed to give his horse accidentally a kick in the flank that rather upset his temper. The fellow was in a fright; it looked a nasty drop to the left. Being busy with his horse he dropped the leading-rein. I wrenched my hands free, brought my horse round on his hind legs--for an instant his forelegs were fairly dangling over the precipice--and then drove him straight for the man behind, wedging in between him and the cliff.

"The path was narrow, as I said. There wasn't room for two, and as I'd got the inside, the other fellow simply had to go over the precipice. He went. There was plenty of green stuff to break his fall, and I don't wish him any particular harm. You may guess I didn't wait to give him my kind regards, but made off like the wind. The Chief gave me a cheer. Before I turned the corner that would hide me from the rest, half-a-dozen shots were flying after me, and one of them struck my horse. But he kept on. I got safe to the end of the ledge, and then dived into the forest, where they might have hunted for a month of Sundays without finding me.

"I dismounted as soon as I was pretty safe, and led the horse, but the poor beast was done, and dropped after a few miles. I didn't feel very happy. You know what these forests are. Let alone the chance of losing yourself, there are too many jaguars and pumas and snakes to make travelling on foot very pleasant. All I'd

got to defend myself with was--what do you think?"

"What was it?"

"A two-bladed pen-knife, one blade broken, that had slipped into the lining of my pocket and wasn't discovered when they searched us before tying us up. It wouldn't have scared a toad. However, I've roughed it all over the world too long to grizzle over what can't be helped. My game clearly was to make for the Orinoco. All roads lead to Rome, they say: it's certain that all streams in these parts lead to the Orinoco. It struck me I'd be safest on water, so I made up my mind to stop at the first stream I came to and build myself a raft. Floating down with the current I couldn't fail to strike the Orinoco sooner or later."

"A queer thing, this raft of yours."

"It served my turn. You see, I was in a quandary. When I came to a stream it was swarming with caymans, and, what's worse, watersnakes. I dursn't make a raft in their company, and yet I must make it on the brink of the stream, for I couldn't have carried down one big enough to float me. There was plenty of material, of course--dead branches, and bejuco for fastening them together. After a power of thought I hit on the notion of rigging up a sort of cage in which I could make the raft without the risk of having reptiles closer than I liked. I did that on the bank out of range of the caymans--they're not partial to journeys on land. I pushed the cage--it was light enough--down to the edge of the stream, and brought down my materials, and put the raft together inside the cage, where I was safe. It was a longish job. I had to push it out into the stream bit by bit as I finished it, and was always in a stew when I left it in case the current carried it away before I was ready. However, the current was sluggish at the bank, so I was spared that calamity."

"But how have you lived? It's four days since you went away."

"I've lived in this country long enough to know what forest plants are good for food. Not that they're very staying, nor to be compared with bread and cheese. I slept in trees, and here I am, thank God! though I hadn't a notion I had got into this particular stream."

"How far away were you when you escaped?" asked Will.

"Thirty or forty miles at a guess. We marched all the first day and bivouacked for the night at a deserted estancia. I made a bolt for it about ten next morning, struck the stream in the afternoon, and got together the material for the raft before nightfall. I finished it next day, but had to spend another night in a tree, and the stream winds about so much that it has taken me all day to get here."

"I'm glad you've come, but it's a bad look-out for the others. General Carabaño has threatened to shoot you all to-morrow if he doesn't receive £7,000."

"The villain! He won't get it. I don't know what you think, but we're not

worth all that. How do you know?"

Will then related all that had happened to him since he left the stables. When Ruggles heard of General Carabaño's defeat he looked very grave.

"He'll be in a beastly temper," he said. "You and the Chief have dished him between you. He's not the man to have any mercy on folks who have stood in his way, and if he hears that I've escaped he'll be madder than ever. I don't fancy they'll let him know, though."

"But he'll find out when he sends the order to shoot you, if he doesn't go himself. Time's up to-night. If he means what he says it'll be all up to-morrow, unless we can do something. Do you think we could go up in the hydroplane to the place where you struck the stream and then track them across country?"

"I doubt whether we could do it. You see, I wandered about in the forest, and it might take us a week to find the precipice, even with your Indian."

"Did you follow a road when you went off?"

"Not so much as a bridle-path."

"Could we lie in wait for the General's messenger to-morrow?"

"We might do that. I know the main direction from the camp. But where should be we if the General goes himself? He's pretty sure to, and of course he would take an escort. We couldn't tackle a crowd."

"I've got a revolver."

"One revolver wouldn't be much good. You might bring down the General and another, but then you'd be set on and done for. No: that's no good, and I can't see for the life of me that we can do anything."

"But we must, Ruggles. Isn't there some way of finding out where the Chief is?"

"You can go and ask the General, and then he'd raise his terms to £12,000."

Will was silent. It seemed, as Ruggles said, that the case was hopeless. For some time he sat thinking, thinking hard. Suddenly he got up.

"Ruggles, I'm going to the hacienda."

"Nonsense! I didn't mean it," said the man.

"I shall go. I got into the house before; I'll do it again."

"But what if you do?"

"I might hear Carabaño talking."

"And you might not. It was a pure fluke before: luck won't play into your hands again."

"Wait a bit. There's Machado. Ten to one he'll be at his cabin sometime to-night waiting for an answer. The General demanded a reply by midnight. If we could only catch Machado we could wring out of him where the Chief is, and I wouldn't stick at a trifle in dealing with the wretch. He's the worst of the lot, playing the traitor in our camp, and torturing José. He deserves to be paid back

in his own coin. I'll do it, Ruggles. It's a mercy you are here. I'll take Azito; you bring the hydroplane down with José, and wait at the end of the canal in case we have to dash for it. Once on board the hydroplane we might defy them and chance snags."

"It's dangerous, but if you're set on it I'm not the man to stay you. I've been in tight corners myself, and I'd stretch a good many points for the Chief and O'Connor. But for any sake be careful. If they are to be shot we can't alter it, and what's the good of three being murdered instead of two?"

"All right. I won't run my head into a noose if I can help it. I'll start just before dark. You'll take care how you go down, won't you? It would be a disaster if you were wrecked."

"Trust me, Mr. Pentelow. I hope you'll have as easy a job as I shall."

In half-an-hour Will set off with Azito. They went, as they had gone in the morning, across the old camp to the farther side of the railway line, but instead of plunging into the forest, ventured to steal along at the foot of the embankment. It was pitch dark by the time they arrived opposite the new camp. Crawling up the embankment, they lay on the top to take a good look around before going farther. There were fires in the camp, but these were beginning to die down: apparently the men had already cooked their evening meal. They could see the dark forms of the sentries as they passed between the tents. The house was lit up.

They crept along the embankment until they came to the spot below which, about twenty yards from the line, stood the telegraph cabin. Will told Azito to go forward until he could see the side in which the window was. In a few minutes the Indian returned and reported that there was no light in the cabin. Will supposed that he had come too early: the message was not expected before midnight. Yet it was strange that a man had not been left at the cabin to give Machado notice if any communication was made. It was strange, indeed, that Machado himself, considering the importance of the expected message, had not thought it worth while, or been ordered by the General, to remain constantly on duty. Will was so much surprised that he determined to creep down to the cabin and see for himself. Perhaps Machado might be taking a nap in the dark. If he were not there, Will thought it possible to remain in hiding between the cabin and the line, seize Machado when he arrived, and wring out of him the information he desired.

Bidding Azito remain on guard and warn him if he saw any sign of danger, Will descended the embankment on hands and heels and stole forward to the cabin. He listened at the wall. There was no sound from within. The door faced the hacienda. Will peeped round the corner. The nearest tents were at least a hundred yards distant, and the fires were so low that they seemed to make the darkness only the more intense where their light did not directly fall. He crept round to the door, noiselessly lifted the latch, and, listening with his heart in

his mouth, stepped in. It was pitch dark. There was not a sound. Grasping his revolver, he moved forward on tip-toe. He remembered clearly the position of the table and chair, and groped towards them, putting out his feet stealthily so that he should not knock against them and make a noise. The table and chair were not where they had been. He touched the wall, and moved along inch by inch. To his amazement, the cabin was bare. Table, chair, telegraph instrument--all had been removed.

What could be the meaning of this? Moving now without such extreme care, Will passed out again and looked up to see if the wire still ran into the cabin. He could just distinguish it against the starlit sky. He crept back towards the embankment, following the wire to the place where it left the telegraph line; and then he saw that another wire had been connected, and ran across the gardens. Evidently after what had happened at the cabin, General Carabaño had taken the precaution of removing the instrument. Will peered into the darkness to see if the wire entered a tent or another cabin, but after a few yards he lost sight of it. Returning to the spot where he had left Azito, he asked him if he, with his sharper sight, could follow the course of the wire. The Indian stood looking for a few seconds: then he said that he saw a pole about thirty yards from the house. It had not been there before. He went a few yards farther along the embankment, and declared that the wire stretched from the pole to the house, where it ran through one of the windows in a room at the side just behind the servants' quarters. The window was half-closed, and within the room was a light. Will could no longer doubt that this was the place where Machado was awaiting the message from Bolivar.

Difficult as Will had known his task to be, it now seemed impossible. On the former occasion of his nocturnal visit to the house the camp was half-a-mile distant. Now the tents formed the arc of a circle about it, the nearest of them being not more than a dozen yards away. Only through the camp could the house be approached. Sounds of laughter and conversation could be distinctly heard: it was clear that the men were as yet very lively. Even had they turned in for the night there were still the sentries to elude. But when Will thought of Machado sitting at his instrument in that little room, almost within stone's throw of him, he could not bring himself to give up all hope of helping his friends. Five minutes with Machado, unless he had entirely mistaken his man, would be enough to wring out of him the information he so earnestly desired. Failing that information, he felt that the Chief and Jerry O'Connor were doomed. Was there not, even now, a chance?

He resolved to wait. Nothing could be attempted while the camp was still awake. Perhaps when the men had gone into their tents for the night an opportunity for slipping past the sentries might offer. So he lay down on the embankment,

with Azito beside him, to keep vigil.

Waiting is always tedious, and Will's impatience was such that he found the enforced delay almost unendurable. It was too dark for him to see his watch, and he durst not strike a light. The fires sank lower and lower, but it seemed hours before there was any sensible diminution of the sounds in the camp. It was, in fact, nearly half-past ten before silence reigned and Will thought it possible to leave his post. Bidding Azito in a whisper to follow him, he crawled down the embankment with great caution, so as not to disturb a single stone or clod of earth, and stole as softly as a cat to the part of the encampment nearest to the house.

When within a few yards of the tents, he lay on the ground to watch his opportunity. He could just see the dark form of the sentry passing to and fro beyond the line of tents. The man's beat appeared to extend for about fifty yards, and at the end of it farthest from the house he stopped to talk to the sentry next him. Will heard the low hum of their voices. All was quiet within the house. To get into it he must pass the lighted window of Machado's room. The sentries were bound to see him. What could he do?

He lay for some minutes in sheer perplexity. The sentry passed more than once. Suddenly he made up his mind to a desperate venture. The room next to Machado's was in darkness. It was, he knew, a cloak-room. There was a door between them. He would enter the enclosure boldly between the nearest tent and the house, when the sentries were next engaged in chatting. They would never dream that an unauthorized person had dared to come into the very jaws of the lion. There were many Indians among General Carabaño's men, so that the sight of Azito would not necessarily alarm the sentries. He would walk with Azito openly along the back of the house, get beneath the veranda, where it was even darker than in the camp enclosure, and by hook or by crook find an entrance.

He explained his plan softly to Azito. The Indian was timorous, but after a few moments' thought he agreed to accompany his master. They crawled to the right until they came just behind the last tent of the line, and waited until they heard the low hum of the sentries' voices. Then they stepped round the tent, and walked slowly towards the house. Will's heart was thumping violently, but he walked steadily on until he reached the steps leading up to the veranda. He saw with joy as he passed the lighted window that a thin curtain hung across it. The sentries gave no sign. He mounted the steps, Azito close behind, and stood by the window of the room next to Machado's. He waited for a moment, then gently tried the latch of the French window. It was not secured. He opened the door, and they stepped noiselessly in.

CHAPTER XII--THE KIDNAPPERS

The door between the two rooms was closed. That into the patio was ajar. Will stole across the room and peeped into the patio. A small lamp was burning at the farther end, near the front door. A man sat dozing on a chair outside De Mello's room, which was no doubt occupied by Carabaño. Another lay fast asleep on the floor at the patio door of Machado's room. But for these the patio was empty. To enter it seemed too risky; Will stepped back into the cloak-room and listened at the door of communication. There was no sound. He waited, pressing his ear against the door. Now he heard slight snores: somebody was in the farther room, asleep. He gently tried the handle. The door was not locked. Grasping his revolver, Azito having his machete, he quickly opened the door and went in. Machado was asleep on a long cane chair. The telegraphic instrument stood on a table at his left hand. Will softly closed the door behind him, and motioned to Azito to stand at the door opening into the patio. A clock on a shelf told the hour: it was five minutes past eleven.

Machado was fast asleep and did not stir. Was it possible to wake him without causing him to cry out or make some sound that would alarm the men in the patio? Will went to the foot of the cane chair, and pointing his revolver full at Machado's head, he gently touched him. The man moved uneasily. Will touched him again. He drew up his legs slightly. Another touch, and his eyes opened. For a moment Will thought that the shock would itself force a cry from him, but at a warning hiss his jaw dropped, and a look of terror distorted his face as he saw the shining barrel of the revolver within two feet of his eyes. With a gesture of warning Will allowed him a few seconds to collect himself: then in tones so low that they could scarcely have been heard outside he said--

"You are awake?"

Machado's swarthy face had gone grey with fear. He did not reply.

"It depends on yourself whether you awake again. Do as I bid you and your life is safe. At the least sign of treachery I shoot you like a dog. You understand?"

Machado's lips moved, but no sound came from them.

"I have some questions to ask," Will continued rapidly, but in the same quiet tone. "If your answers are contrary to what I know to be fact you are a dead man. Where is Señor Jackson?"

"At Las Piedras," said the man in a whisper.

Will started. This was the name of General Carabaño's hacienda nearly fifty miles away.

"What is to be done with him and Señor O'Connor?"

"They are held at ransom."

"And if ransom is refused?"

"Then they will be shot."

"How do you know?"

"The General says so."

"Will he keep his word?"

"Yes."

"How do you know?"

"He has sworn it."

"When is it to be?"

"To-morrow."

"Why are you here?"

"I am waiting."

"What for?"

"A message."

"From where?"

"Ciudad Bolivar."

"What message?"

"A reply."

"What?"

"To the General's."

"What was his message?"

"If the ransom is not promised by midnight the prisoners will be shot to-morrow."

"Has he had no message before?"

"Yes."

"What was it?"

"The President refused to pay a ransom."

"The General repeated his demand?"

"Yes."

"Does he expect consent?"

"No; it is a last attempt."

"You are speaking the truth?"

"Yes."

There was no doubt of it. The man's terror was so evident that he would scarcely have had the wits to invent a falsehood. Nor could he know what information Will already had. His answers indeed gave Will nothing of which he was not already aware, except the whereabouts of the prisoners.

Will stood for a moment thinking, still pointing his revolver at the abject Spaniard. A desperate scheme had suggested itself. He had already risked much: was it not possible to risk still more? His task with Machado had been unexpectedly easy: might not a greater task prove feasible? It was clear that unless the ransom was agreed to by the time stated, the fate of the prisoners was sealed. It was clear also from what the Jefe at Bolivar had told him that there was not the slightest likelihood of the Government yielding on this point. He knew roughly the direction of General Carabaño's hacienda, but recognized how little chance there was of doing anything to help his friends. He could not reach them during the night: the journey was long and dangerous. There remained, as it seemed, one chance: that of intercepting the General's messenger in the morning. He asked another question.

"If the reply from Ciudad Bolivar is unsatisfactory, the General will send a messenger to Las Piedras?"

"He will go himself."

The answer disposed of Will's last hope. The only means of saving the prisoners was to deal with the General himself. It was a desperate game to play in the midst of a hostile camp, but his first move, with Machado, had been successful, and the man was so cowed and terror-stricken that he might prove a serviceable instrument in the larger scheme. Time was running short; it was a quarter past eleven. Will made up his mind to risk all.

"Dismiss the man at your door," he said. "Tell him that you need him no longer. You will take the message to the General yourself. Attempt no treachery. I will keep my word."

He motioned to Azito, of whose presence Machado seemed to become aware for the first time, to stand behind a clothes-press near the camp-bed.

"Open the door only a few inches," he continued. "Now!"

He stepped behind the door, allowing room for it to open about twelve inches. He could not be seen by the man in the patio, but was able to cover Machado with his revolver. The telegraphist lay for a few moments as though hesitating.

"Quick!" said Will in a fierce whisper.

Machado rose unsteadily and, walking to the door, opened it. In a low voice he called to the sleeping man. There was no reply or movement.

"Kick him!" whispered Will.

Machado touched the man with his foot. He started up. Machado gave him the instruction Will had dictated, and he went off at once, glad enough, no doubt, to find a more comfortable bed. When he was gone, Will closed the door.

"Now, the password," he said.

"*Bolivar*," replied Machado.

But Will marked a slight hesitation before the answer was given.

"Are you sure?" he said fiercely. "A mistake will cost you dear."

"A slip, señor," said Machado, quailing. "Bolivar was last night's password: to-night's is Libertad."

"Make no more slips. Now go to your table."

On the table, close to the instrument, lay a number of telegram forms plundered from the railway, and a pencil. Pointing to these, Will said--

"Write what I say. 'Release prisoners: will send----' Stop there, and add, 'Message interrupted.'"

Machado wrote the words. His fingers trembled so violently that the strokes were like those of an old man. Then Will, telling Azito to stand over Machado with his knife and to kill him if he moved, he turned the handle at the side of the instrument that switched off the current, and worked the operating handle for half-a-minute. The clicks could be distinctly heard in the patio, but the current being switched off, no effect was produced at the other end of the wire.

Giving the telegraph form to Machado, he said--

"Where does the General sleep?"

"In a room on the other side of the patio, near the door."

"The man outside the door is an orderly?"

"Yes, señor."

"You will take this slip and hand it to the orderly. Say you must hurry back, and return here."

Will thought he detected a gleam of relief and hope in the man's eyes. But if Machado fancied he saw a chance of escape, he was disappointed by the next words.

"I shall stand near this door, with my revolver. It has six chambers. Beware how you hurry or stumble. If you delay one instant longer than is required to repeat what I have said----"

He looked significantly into Machado's eyes. The man opened the door and went along the patio. Once he half turned, as if to see whether he was watched, but thought better of it and went on: it was nervous work, walking with a revolver pointed at his back. He reached the door, handed the slip to the orderly, said a few

words, and returned at once. Will saw the orderly knock at the General's door, and just as Machado came into the room, the General called to the man to enter.

Will closed the door. There was no time to be lost if the effect of the message was what he hoped it would be. The clock said twenty minutes to twelve.

"Sit in your chair," he said to Machado, "and occupy yourself with your instrument. Make believe that you are sending a message and awaiting the answer."

Machado sat as directed, with his back to the door. Then Will took Azito's knife and cut down the cord that drew the jalousies across the window.

"Tie his legs to the chair," he said to the Indian, adding to Machado: "You will suffer no harm if you do not resist. Work the instrument."

Will was now in a fever of uncertainty and apprehension. Would the fish rise to the bait? He knew the cupidity of the Liberator. If he was the man Will believed him to be, he would not wait to receive the completed message in writing, but would come across the patio to be at hand when the instrument spelled out the words promising the addition of 60,000 pesos to his chest. There was one thing to fear: that he would not come alone. He might waken his lieutenants on the way; then the game would be up. But Will reflected that a refusal had already come from Bolivar. Probably neither General Carabaño nor any of his officers expected a favourable reply, otherwise they would not all have gone to bed. Machado had been left on the chance of the Government relenting, and he had done his duty, the General would think.

For a few moments there was no sign. Will began to fear that the trap would not work. He said a few words to Azito, who tore a long strip from the bottom of the curtain and rolled it up. The instrument clicked on, Machado never turning his head, but looking out of the corners of his eyes. At last there was a footfall along the patio. Will slipped behind the door. Immediately afterwards it was burst open.

"Well, what do they say?"

General Carabaño took two strides into the room. Noiselessly closing the door with his foot, Will sprang to the Liberator, threw his arms in a strangling embrace about his neck, and pulled him backwards to the floor. The General struggled and spluttered, half-choked. He was a powerful man, and in a wrestling match on even terms Will would have come off badly. But while the General was striving to regain his footing Azito glided from his place of concealment, forced a gag between his teeth and helped Will to bear him to the floor. Then, while Will held him firmly, the Indian deftly bound his arms and feet with the remainder of the cord. By the time this was done the General was black in the face with his frantic efforts to rise and to cry out. Meanwhile Machado, who had stopped the clicking when he heard the General enter, had watched with a look of horror all that went on. He dared not raise his voice, knowing full well that before he could

release himself one or other of these desperate visitors would be free to deal with him.

The Liberator of Venezuela was now in bonds. There had been so little sound that the orderly at the farther end of the patio could have heard nothing. The other officers in the house were asleep. If only Fortune would smile a little longer, Will felt that the game would be absolutely in his hands.

Bidding Azito keep guard over the General, prostrate on the floor, Will went to the chair and released Machado.

"Stand up, señor," he said. "I have to ask a little more of you, and so long as you do exactly as I tell you, you will come to no harm from me."

"I had no hand in this, Excellency," the unhappy man blurted out, addressing the General.

"Silence!" said Will. "I will make that clear. You shall be released presently beyond the reach of General Carabaño or any of his officers. You shall not suffer for double treachery. Stand still!"

He quickly tied Machado's ankles together with a short piece of cord, so that he could walk but not run.

"Now listen very carefully. We are going to pass out of the camp. We shall probably come to the front of the house. The sentry will challenge you. You will give the password, and your name. He will ask you what we are carrying. You will say: 'His Excellency sends a spy to feed the caymans.' Say it now."

"But--but--" stammered the man, "you will not----"

"No, I shall not harm his Excellency. Repeat what I said."

"'His Excellency sends a spy to feed the caymans,'" said Machado.

"That is right. The sentry may ask questions. You must answer him: say what you please, but do not play me false. The sentry may wish to see the spy. You must keep him off. If you cannot do so, so much the worse for you. You cannot run, you are unarmed--I will make sure of that; and if you attempt to give the alarm be sure that you, at any rate, will not escape. You understand? Your safety depends on ours. And it will be well to remember, too, that if we fail, nobody will believe all this was done without your connivance. Is it clear?"

"Yes, señor," murmured the man.

Will searched his pockets for arms. He had none. But he shot a momentary glance towards a long cape hanging from a peg on the wall. Will saw the glance, and feeling the garment, discovered a revolver. This he put in his pocket. Then, opening the door into the adjoining cloak-room, he ordered Machado to take the General's head and Azito the legs. The General writhed and heaved, until Will slipped under his knees a short board that held his legs stiff. The two men lifted him. When they stood in the doorway Will turned out the light. Then he bade them carry their bulky burden into the next room.

From the window Will saw that the camp was in utter darkness. No lights from the back of the house shone upon the ground. He opened both leaves of the window and passed on to the veranda. The others followed him slowly as he made his way to the right-hand corner. There he stopped and peeped round. The stables were opposite this face of the house, and a light shone upon them from the General's bedroom. It would be unsafe to pass that way. They must descend from the veranda, cross a few yards of ground, and come to the rear of the stables. Between these and the last of the line of tents, on this side, there was a gap of perhaps fifteen yards. Will listened for the footfall of a sentry. All was silent save slight sounds from the stables: probably the man was asleep. Bidding the others follow him he went down the steps and walked on. It was very dark: their forms could scarcely have been seen if the sentry had been alert.

They came to the back of the stables, and, striking to the right, reached the end of the wall. Here they halted for a moment, while Will glanced around. A light through the open door of the house was reflected on the surface of the lake. To his joy he saw that De Mello's little sailing yacht lay at the jetty. He had feared it might have been removed. Creeping along by the front wall of the stables he came to a spot whence he could see the door. A sentry was sitting on the ground, leaning against the wall, his head bent forward as in slumber. It might be possible to get to the jetty without waking him. Will returned to the men, and whispering "Remember!" to Machado, he led the way towards the terrace whence a few steps led down to the jetty.

They were half-way there when, just as they came within the illuminated space, the sentry in a sleepy voice cried, "Who goes there?"

"A friend!" answered Machado at once.

"The word?"

"Libertad!"

The General began to struggle, and Will pressed the cold muzzle of the revolver to his brow.

"Who is it?" said the sentry.

"Stop, and answer him," whispered Will.

"Miguel Machado: you know me," said Machado.

"Ah, Señor Machado, it is you. What have you got there?"

"His Excellency sends a spy to feed the caymans."

"A spy!" cried the man, more wakefully. "Who is it?"

"A wretched Indian, once in the service of the Englishman."

"Is that all? I hoped it was the Englishman who escaped. I was coming to have a look at him, but if it is an Indian it is not worth while. I shall hear him squeal. Is there any news from Bolivar, Señor Machado?"

"None."

"Then the Englishmen will be shot to-morrow," said the man. "A good riddance. Come and have a chat on your way back."

During this conversation Will had stood behind Machado so that his face could not be seen. The lamp in the hall was a small one, and the light revealed little. They moved on again, came to the steps, and descending these reached the end of the jetty. The General had been passive since he felt the cold steel against his brow; but now, feeling that his last chance had come, he gave a sudden jerk with his legs which threw Azito down. Instantly Will was upon him, but he was a very powerful man, and, bound though he was, he wriggled and heaved his body with such violence that it was difficult to hold him. In the struggle he managed by some means to get rid of the gag, and shouted at the top of his voice--

"Help! help! I am General Carabaño."

His voice was of peculiar timbre, and even the slowest-witted sentry could not have failed to recognize it. A moment after he had cried out, the sentry fired off his rifle and shouted into the hall of the house. At once Will and Azito caught the General by the feet and began to drag him as fast as possible along the jetty, Machado still holding his head. They were below the level of the terrace, so that none of them was at present in danger of being shot. The General was still shouting; the sentry, having given the alarm, was reloading as he ran towards the terrace.

The fugitives had now reached the yacht. Will released his hold of the General, and drew in the painter. While he was doing this, the sentry reached the head of the steps and fired. But the darkness and his flurry combined to spoil his aim. Realizing that he had missed, he sprang down the steps, and ran along the jetty, clubbing his rifle. Machado saw him coming, and shrank away; but Azito, dropping the General's feet, waited in a crouching posture, and, parrying the blow with his machete, drove at the man with his head and butted him into the water.

The General, left thus momentarily unguarded, struggled vehemently to break or shake off his bonds. His wriggling brought him to the edge of the narrow jetty, and when Will, having loosed the painter, turned to secure his prisoner, he saw him roll over into the lake on the opposite side. Instantly he flung himself at full length on the jetty, peering into the water for the prize he was determined not to lose. The lake was shallow. In a few moments the General rose spluttering from his immersion, and yelled again for help. Will grabbed him by his wholly hair: Azito plunged into the water, and together they hauled him on to the jetty and threw him into the yacht. Machado had already jumped into it. Will and the Indian followed. The latter seized a paddle, Will pushed off, and the little vessel began to move down the lake towards the canal.

CHAPTER XIII--A SNAG

The kidnappers were not a moment too soon. The sentry, dazed and half-drowned, struggled from the muddy bottom of the lake just as the yacht put off. Scrambling on to the jetty, he filled the air with his cries. While Azito paddled the boat towards the canal, Will looked back towards the house. Figures were pouring out, some in their night attire, others pulling on their coats as they ran. The air rang with their shouts. They all made for the jetty. One or two fired aimlessly; the little vessel must now be invisible to them in the darkness, and until they inquired of the sentry they would not know what had happened. There were no other boats at the jetty, so that pursuit by water was impossible, but Will wondered anxiously whether he could reach the stream at the end of the canal before the men could gain it by running along the banks. If they posted themselves on the banks of the narrow canal, he would be at their mercy.

The boat was small. It would carry no more than two comfortably. Overloaded as it now was--the General alone was no light weight--it could not make anything like the speed of a man running. But it was taking the diameter of the lake; the pursuers would have to run round the circumference: and Will remembered that when they reached the canal they would find their course checked by the vegetation, the banks having been allowed to return to their primitive wildness. This would give the boat a little time.

It entered the canal from the lake. The shouts of the men drew nearer. They came from both sides. General Carabaño cried out continually. The gag was lost, and Will had nothing at hand with which to silence him. Azito plied his paddle desperately, and Machado, as anxious now as Will himself to escape, seized a second paddle and helped to propel the boat.

Had Ruggles brought the hydroplane to the end of the canal? What would happen if he was not there? The pursuers were probably numbered by hundreds, and even if they fired at random across the stream, so many could hardly fail to hit one or other of the occupants of the boat. Will peered anxiously into the darkness. If Ruggles had come, surely he must have heard the noise. Then why

had he made no sign? Had the hydroplane broken down? All at once from down the canal came the throb of the engine. Will looked over the bow of the boat. He could just see, on the faintly shimmering surface of the water, a dark shape approaching.

"Ruggles!" he shouted.

"Ahoy!" came the reply. "Look out, Mr. Pentelow, I'm stern foremost."

"Good man! Catch the painter when I throw it. Don't come any farther."

Azito was paddling more slowly now, fearful of dashing into the hydroplane in the darkness. The shouts of the pursuers sounded nearer than ever: Will heard the men crashing through the undergrowth, regardless of snakes, as of all the dangers that beset the unwary by night in tropical jungle. The boat came to a stop within a yard of the hydroplane. Will flung the painter on board: Ruggles seized it and instantly started the motor. At the same moment a shot rang out from the right; another on the left; then there was a fusilade, and Will heard the bullets splashing into the water and singing through the air. The pace of the vessel was quickening; but Ruggles could not drive the hydroplane at speed, for though he was able to steer safely between the banks of the canal, it was so short, and the stream beyond so narrow, that there was a danger of running the vessel against the farther bank if he went too fast. But the speed was great enough to shake off the pursuers, and in another minute the hydroplane swept round the corner of the canal, her head turned in the direction of the tributary of the Orinoco.

"Go on slowly," cried Will to Ruggles. "They won't dare to pursue us now. We are safe till the morning."

"Will you come aboard?" asked Ruggles.

"Not at present. I have got a prisoner."

"Machado?"

"He has been my right-hand man." He was speaking in English, so that Machado did not understand him.

"You don't say so! Who's your prisoner, then?"

"His Excellency the Liberator of Venezuela, General Carabaño."

"By gosh! this beats cock-fighting. How on earth did you do it?"

"I'll tell you all by and by. It's the greatest piece of luck. We'll hold him as hostage for the Chief and O'Connor."

"Did you find out where they are?"

"At the General's own hacienda, Las Piedras, fifty miles up-country."

"In any danger?"

"Not now. He was going to shoot them to-morrow--to-day, I should say. But nobody will touch them while we have the General in our hands. We've smashed this revolution, Ruggles."

"Don't hallo till we're out of the wood, as the Chief would say. They'll come

after us in the morning."

"We'll be out of their reach. We can go faster as soon as we reach the tributary--but not too fast, for goodness' sake: we don't want to strike a snag. At ten miles an hour we shall be at the junction by the time it's light, and then we shall have a straight run to Bolivar."

"But suppose they run to the junction by train and get there before us?"

"I hadn't thought of that. What a fool I am! That would be the end of us. We shall have to go pretty fast after all. Not yet; this stream's dangerous. It's lucky we haven't far to go before we get to the tributary."

"Look out!" cried Ruggles. "I've just got a whack in the eye from a branch."

His warning came too late. The yacht stopped with a jerk as its mast came into contact with an overhanging mass of foliage. The light pole snapped and fell into the bottom; at the same time the painter broke.

"It doesn't matter, luckily," said Will. "We can drift down-stream. When it begins to get light we'll all board the hydroplane, though it will be a tight fit. Have you got a match?"

"Not one. Why?"

"I wanted to see the time. We ought to get into the tributary by about half-past one. There's plenty of time."

General Carabaño had been very quiet since the boat left the jetty. But while Will talked to Ruggles, he had been speaking in a low tone to Machado.

"You shall rue this, Señor Machado," he said fiercely.

"Excellency, I am not to blame."

"You expect me to believe that? Could these villains have committed this outrage upon me without your help?"

"They stole into the house, Excellency----"

"What were you about?"

"I was at my instrument, according to your instructions, Excellency. They came in when I was taking the telegram to you."

"That is a lie," said Azito, with a grunt.

"What do you say, dog?" demanded the General.

"I say nothing," replied the Indian. "This man lies: that is all I say."

"You will tell me the truth, Señor Machado. You played the traitor to the Englishmen; if you have also played the traitor to me I vow you shall pay for it."

Machado hesitated. On the one hand the General was a prisoner, on his way to Ciudad Bolivar, where unsuccessful revolutionist leaders usually had short shrift. So far as appearances went, he had nothing to fear. On the other hand, prisoners sometimes escaped; it had occurred to him, as it had to Ruggles, that a train might be sent in pursuit: it might reach the junction first. General Carabaño at large would be a foe whose revenge it would be wise to shun.

"I will tell you the whole truth, Excellency," he said. "I was asleep in my chair: a click would have awakened me. These villains stole upon me, threatened me with death, and forced me to invent the telegram to decoy you from your room."

"It was false?" cried the General.

"Every word of it, Excellency."

The General gave a gasp of relief. One of his bitterest reflections had been that he had lost 60,000 pesos. Then his anger blazed against Machado.

"You are a cur as well as a traitor, I see," he said. "A man of any courage would have defied these wretches. If I had my hands free I would whip you like a dog."

"It is easy to talk like that," said Machado, stung by the General's contemptuous tone. "Would you have done otherwise with a pistol at your head? At least our lives are safe, and I may yet do you a service."

"How?"

"Captain Espejo will certainly send a train in pursuit, Excellency. Even now I doubt not the engine is getting up steam. The hydroplane cannot go fast in the dark. The train will be first at the junction. We shall be rescued."

"That will be Captain Espejo's service, not yours."

"But we shall be taken on board the hydroplane, Excellency. The painter is broken; they cannot tow us, or if they can, they will not wish so to check their speed. Suppose I am able to damage the engine, Excellency?" he whispered, so that Azito could not hear him. "Then their chance of outstripping the train is gone."

"Could you do it?"

"I could try, Excellency. Such engines are very delicate; a trifle puts them out of order; and we shall have several hours."

"Do it, Señor Machado," whispered the General eagerly; "and when I make myself President you shall be--yes, you shall be my postmaster-general. Say no more: the Englishman has stopped talking."

Hydroplane and yacht drifted down on the slow current through the darkness. Now and then one or the other would run aground, which caused delay, but no danger, the speed being so low. None of the party knew what hour of the night it was when they came into the tributary, the scene of Will's first meeting with Azito. It was, in fact, nearly two o'clock--time to transfer the prisoner to the hydroplane and increase the speed. Ruggles threw out the little anchor, to allow the yacht to draw alongside.

"There are six of us. We can never all squeeze into the hydroplane," he said, when Will was only a foot or two away. "General Carabaño will take room for two."

"I'm afraid you're right," replied Will. "We shall have to make a hawser out of the halyards, and tow as before. It will put more work on the engine, but I think it can stand it, and if we can get to the narrows safely we shall be all right."

"Won't it take longer to plane?"

"It won't be safe to plane at all, but that won't matter. The current is with us."

"Have you got enough petrol?"

"Yes, I bought some in Bolivar. I came up very slowly, so as not to use too much, and there should be enough to carry us to Bolivar, or at least to the broken culvert, especially as we needn't go fast when we are past the junction."

"That's all right, then. My notion is that I had better board the yacht and look after the General. You will want Azito to pole, and you had better have Machado with you. I wish I had a pistol: it might come handy."

"I've got a spare one: took it from Machado's room. Here you are. Your plan's all right. We must take care that the hawser is firmly fixed."

"All right. I'll keep my eye on the General. He shan't slip his bonds, and won't want to: he could only escape by swimming, and I guess he's too scared of caymans to try that."

The transfers were soon affected. Machado exchanged a meaning glance with the General as he left him. The General for the first time made a formal protest.

"I warn you," he said to Ruggles as that worthy stepped to his side. "You have committed an unpardonable atrocity in laying violent hands on the Liberator of Venezuela. I demand that you set me ashore at the earliest possible moment, otherwise you will have a heavy reckoning to pay when I establish my authority."

"Don't you worry, General," said Ruggles consolingly. "You wanted to get into Bolivar, I understand. Well, we'll take you there, free of charge. Couldn't be a fairer offer."

The General muttered an oath and relapsed into silence.

The hawser having been made fast, Will started the motor and set the hydroplane going at a speed of about ten miles an hour. To go faster while it was still dark was unwise: he hoped also unnecessary. Azito stood forward with his pole: José was at the engine with his oil-can; Machado, to his disappointment, was given a seat beside Will at the steering-wheel. In that position he was unable to interfere with the machinery. But he still hoped that an opportunity might offer before the night was over.

It was more than fifty miles by river to the junction. Will had pondered his task as the yacht drifted down the smaller stream, and recognized the dangers. First, there was the navigation of the river in the darkness; but the danger of this might be avoided with Azito's care, and by maintaining only a moderate speed.

The second danger was that Captain Espejo might run a train to the narrowest part of the river some forty miles away, where the bank was fairly clear of vegetation and the railway line was near the stream. That spot would be reached about dawn. If the enemy got there first and lined the bank, they could riddle the hydroplane with bullets, and a single well-planted shot would cripple the engine, to say nothing of the risks to which the occupants of the vessel would be exposed. The third danger was that Captain Espejo might run the train beyond the narrows to the junction. At this part of its course the river made a wide bend, while the railway ran fairly straight; so that if the hydroplane got safely past the narrows there was still a possibility of the train outstripping it before the junction was reached. But the train, consisting as it must do of heavy goods wagons, could not approach without noise, which would give warning of the necessity of increasing speed. Nor did Will suppose that the Captain would venture to drive the train at full speed in pitch darkness over a new track, in which there were many awkward curves before it reached the straight run to the junction. On the whole, Will felt fairly easy in mind, and since the safety of the hydroplane was all-important, he contented himself with the moderate speed of ten knots.

The voyage had been in progress little more than an hour when Azito suddenly turned round, and said--

"I hear a train, señor."

Will instantly stopped the engine. While it throbbed he could hear nothing else. The hydroplane drifted silently on the current. From the far distance, on the right bank, came the characteristic rumble of a heavy train--a sound impossible to mistake. Ruggles heard it at the same moment.

"We must cut and run for it now," he said, "and no mistake."

"Yes, and we must have the General aboard. It will be a near thing at the best. We must make room for him somehow."

As he said this he backed the vessel to allow the yacht to come alongside. Then he gave the wheel to José, turning to help Ruggles to lift the General on board. Machado thought his chance was come. He took up the light anchor, as though to throw it over and hold the vessel while the transfer was made. He really intended to dash it into the machinery. But just as he was on the point of hurling it, Azito sprang at him and brought his pole down with tremendous force on his forearm. He dropped the anchor with a howl of pain. At the same moment the General was hauled over the side and laid just in front of the engine. Ruggles cast off the hawser and stowed himself near José; Will returned to his seat; and opening the throttle little by little he set the hydroplane going, at ten, fifteen, and finally twenty knots. The extra weight she carried depressed her in the water, and more power than usual was necessary before she would plane.

Will had heard Machado's cry, but was too intent upon his task to pay any

heed to it. He knew full well the frightful risks he was running in pressing the engine so hard in the darkness, but there was no alternative. He must reach the junction before the train. Alarmed at the speed, Ruggles suggested that it would be better to lie up until the morning, but Will would not hear of it.

"We couldn't get past them. It's neck or nothing," he said shortly.

The vessel whizzed along. The rumble of the train seemed to draw no nearer. Azito stood forward, but the pace was so great that in the darkness it was tremendously difficult to give the course. Suddenly there was a jolt and a jar. Azito shot forward on to the wind-screen; those who were seated were jostled violently against one another, and Will narrowly escaped a collision with the steering-wheel. After the momentary jerk the hydroplane rushed on, but only for a few seconds. Then the engine stopped dead, and the vessel was once more drifting at three knots down the stream.

CHAPTER XIV--REPAIRS

"What's happened?" asked Ruggles anxiously.

"We struck a snag: goodness knows what damage is done. We shall have to run into the bank and wait till morning. Can't see to do anything in the dark. Was there ever such beastly bad luck!"

"Well, you couldn't expect everything to go smoothly. You haven't had much to complain of so far."

"That's true; but just at this moment, when everything depended on our keeping ahead of the train! Listen to it. We must be close on the narrows, to judge by the row it's making."

"It's lucky we hadn't got any farther, then."

By this time Will had steered the vessel to the left bank, running under the overhanging branches of a large tree. Before it came to rest, Azito beat the bank with his pole to scare away any alligator that might lurk there.

"Water's coming in," said Will. "But I'm afraid that's not the worst. We can stop a leak, but we are done if there's anything seriously wrong with the engine. We haven't even got the yacht now."

"Better lift the craft on to the bank, so that she doesn't become absolutely waterlogged," Ruggles suggested.

Everybody got out, Azito removing the small stock of food left in the vessel, and Ruggles and José lifting the General between them.

"Shall we untie his cords?" said Will. "He must be pretty stiff and uncomfortable."

"It depends what you mean to do. Will you still have a try at getting him to Bolivar?"

"Without a doubt. There's the Chief to consider."

"Then you mustn't loose him. It won't be safe. By the way, what was that howl I heard as we hauled him into the boat?"

"I don't know."

"Señor, it was this man," said the Indian, pointing to Machado. "He was going to hurt the engine."

"It's a lie!" cried Machado, in abject fear.

"Tell us what he did, Azito," said Will.

The Indian explained that Machado and the General had conversed in low tones while on the yacht, arousing his suspicion. He told how he had prevented the man from carrying out his intention when the Señor's back was turned. Will caught Machado's arm, and he winced.

"Tie him up," said Will. "He shan't have another chance."

Machado was bound and laid beside the General. Food was distributed, but sparingly; the supply brought from Bolivar would soon be exhausted. Then they sat down to wait for daylight, not daring to sleep, in case danger in the shape of beast or man should come. They heard the train rumbling along to their left, until by and by the sound died away.

The dawn stole upon them. They all presented a sorry and woe-begone appearance, none more than General Carabaño. When captured he was wearing a long flowered dressing-gown, the colours of which had "run" through his immersion in the lake. He had lost the well-fed and arrogant look which he habitually wore. He made no further protest, but accepted in sullen silence the meagre portion of food allotted to him, and meekly allowed his arms to be rebound when the brief meal was finished.

Will and Ruggles lost no time in making an examination of the hydroplane. They found that a sharp branch of a submerged tree had penetrated the bottom and pierced the petrol-tank, where it had snapped off. The pressure which usually fed the petrol up to the engine had forced it out of the tank, and Will realized with despair that the hydroplane was now of no more use to them than a raft. All the petrol that was left was about a gallon in one of the cans.

"We are clean done, Ruggles," he said. "There's not the ghost of a chance of

our getting to Bolivar."

"Except at three miles an hour," said Ruggles.

"With the river closely watched, as it will be, we can't even drift down. Espejo will know we can't have passed. No one but a madman would attempt to go at any pace in the dark, and then he'd come to grief. I was a fool not to take your advice."

"It's no good crying over spilt milk, as the Chief would say. I can manage to patch up the hole, if that's any good."

"Well, it would keep the thing afloat, but that won't help us much. Without petrol we're stuck."

"Is there none left at the camp?"

"Not a cupful. I brought away the last cans before I went down to Bolivar."

"This is a real fix. That Espejo fellow will begin to search the river when he finds we don't pass; he can easily get canoes from some of the natives down the Orinoco. He's bound to find us if we're still on the river, and then with only two revolvers and a couple of knives between us we shall be at his mercy. Seems to me, as soon as I've patched up the hole, we'd better pole up the river and go straight on instead of turning up the stream towards the hacienda. They might not look for us there."

"There seems nothing else. But it'll take a week to get so far. We've got the current against us, and with our load we should do about one mile an hour. Besides, what's to happen then? They can search for us and keep a watch on the river for any length of time, and our food won't last more than two days on the shortest commons, and precious stale it will be, too."

"The only other plan would be to march along this left bank till we come to a village, and then promise the natives a reward to guide us to Bolivar."

"And let Espejo collar my hydroplane! Not if I can help it. Besides, we've got to rescue the Chief."

"Well, you can think it over while I am stopping the leak."

There were a few simple tools on board, and Ruggles, not belying his reputation as handy man, succeeded after an hour's work in making what he called a good temporary job of it. Will watched him for a time; then, seeing from the General's look that he had taken the full measure of the situation, and expected to be rescued by his lieutenant before long, he said to himself fiercely that he would not be bested, and walked away to think quietly how the disaster might be retrieved.

The want of petrol was the only difficulty. When Ruggles had finished his task the hydroplane would be quite capable of continuing the voyage if fuel could be got. He would, of course, not again attempt to proceed by night; and by day Azito could be trusted to avoid snags. But petrol he had none, nor could he get any; and without it he saw no possible way of working the engine. Was there a

substitute?

Suddenly he remembered that the Indians were accustomed to use for their torches a resinous liquid made from a kind of pine-tree that grew in certain districts. Would not such a wood-spirit be quite as good for his purpose as petrol? Full of the idea, he hastened back to consult Ruggles. Ruggles shook his head.

"I am up to most things in the machine line," he said, "but don't know more than a baby about distilling or chemistry and such. Still, it's a fact, what you say. The Indians do get a sort of benzine from the trees, and benzine and petrol are first cousins, at any rate. There's no harm in trying. But do you know whether these trees grow hereabouts?"

"No, I don't," confessed Will, with misgiving. "I'll ask Azito."

The Indian's reply was cheering. There was a forest of the right kind of trees some miles inland from the left bank of the river. It could be approached by a creek, not very far from the scene of his adventure with the jaguar. This was fortunate. The spot was a good many miles from their present position, and if Captain Espejo did undertake a systematic search of the river, it would be long before he came to the upper reaches. Will decided to set off at once. The petrol tank having been repaired, he could make use of the last gallon of spirit contained in the almost empty can. It would suffice to carry the hydroplane at a low speed perhaps a dozen miles up-stream; then they must trust to their poles. Will made sure that the sparking apparatus was in good order; the whole party went aboard, with two prisoners now instead of one; and while the morning was still young the hydroplane started for the upper river. At first Will hesitated to set the engine going, in case it was heard by the enemy; but reflecting that they had almost certainly run on to the junction several miles below, and would scarcely have begun to search yet, he decided to get as far from them as he could. There would probably be greater danger if the throbbing were heard as they approached the neighbourhood of the hacienda.

A few miles up Azito caught sight of the little yacht, which on being cast off had drifted for some distance and then run into the bank, where it had wedged itself among the lower boughs of a large tree. Will hailed this as a fortunate discovery. By dividing the party the labour of ascending against the current would be considerably lessened. The boat was hauled off and towed until the petrol gave out; then once more General Carabaño was transferred to it, with Ruggles as punter and guardian. Keeping both vessels as near to the left bank as was safe, in order to avoid the full force of the current, Ruggles in the yacht and José and Azito by turns in the hydroplane steadily poled along. It was slow and tiresome work. In two hours they covered a distance less than the hydroplane in good trim would have accomplished in ten minutes. Indeed, it was late in the afternoon when they came to the little stream, running into the left bank, from which they

could gain the creek that Azito had mentioned.

They made their way slowly up this stream for some three miles, passing many small creeks on both sides. At last they reached that which would bring them to the spirit-yielding trees. Their progress now was even slower than it had been. The creek was shallow and very weedy. More than once the vessels were brought up by clinging masses of aquatic vegetation. Not till the short dusk was beginning did they reach the neighbourhood of the wood. Here they found a little sandy strip on which they ran the vessels and disembarked, tired out. After a meagre supper they lay down on a stretch of green sward to pass the night, Will arranging that they should take turns to watch against intrusion by wild beasts.

Early next morning Azito led Will and Ruggles into the wood, and showed them the trees to tap for the spirit. Then he said that he would paddle himself some miles further up the creek in the yacht, until he reached an Indian village where he might obtain food. The others set about rigging up a benzine distillery. This was naturally of the most primitive description. Will first made a clay crucible in which he collected the liquid obtained from the trees; then, connecting this by means of a metal pipe from the engine with a water-bottle he was accustomed to take with him on the hydroplane, he lit a small fire, borrowing a box of matches from Machado, and distilled over the vapour from the crucible to the bottle. It occurred to him to hasten the condensation by placing the bottle in the flowing water of the stream, propping it up with two stones. As soon as he had collected a small quantity of the spirit he tested it, and found that it had all the volatile and inflammable qualities of petrol.

"I'd never have believed it," said Ruggles; "but it will take a month before we get enough to carry us to Bolivar."

"So it will if we don't make more crucibles. There's plenty of clay."

"But what about pipes and bottles?"

"There are plenty of reeds at the edge of the creek: they'll do for pipes. As for bottles, we've got two petrol cans, and we shall have to make some clay bottles. The sooner the better."

They set to work at once with José to make, first, crucibles out of the white clay which formed the subsoil, and as these were finished, they took them into the forest and set them down at the trees they tapped. While the liquid was collecting they gathered reeds from the border of the stream, and fashioned clumsy clay bottles as receptacles of the vapour. By the afternoon they had a dozen pieces of apparatus at work, and Will was in high spirits at the prospect of filling his tank with the all-important fuel. He found the moist heat of the forest very trying, but willingly endured the discomfort and fatigue.

In the evening Azito returned, staggering under a basket loaded with yuca, a root from which a capital bread could be made, and a goat-skin filled with resinous

liquid, purchased in the Indian village. He reported that he had seen, as he came by the edge of the forest, a sloth clinging to the branch of a tree, and several tapirs grubbing for roots, and wished Will to return with him and kill one of the animals for supper; but Will did not care to risk a revolver shot, which might be heard by the enemy if they were coming up the river, and so he decided to make a meal of yuca bread alone.

Next day he set up more crucibles, and then, having at work as many as could be conveniently tended, he adopted Ruggles' advice and rested during the hottest hours. But he grew restless in inaction, and by and by strolled into the forest, whose gloomy depths had a fascination for him. He marked signs of the great struggle for life going on all around. Innumerable creeping plants twined about the trees, striving to force a way to the sunlight in which their gorgeous blossoms might expand, and stifling the vitality out of the forest giants. Beetles and termites scurried hither and thither: birds flitted from bough to bough, pecking at the ripe berries, and carrying away seeds which would germinate in some other part, to be strangled ere they came to maturity, or to grow into stranglers in their turn. Among the other trees the palms rose straight and lofty, their branchless trunks defying the murderous creepers, their leafy crowns dominating as if in contempt the lowlier competitors beneath.

Here he caught sight of a cavy nibbling a nut, there a peccary hunting among the undergrowth for seeds. Moving cautiously among the trees, he had a glimpse of a labba peeping out of a hollow trunk, and disturbed a deer which was lying amid the bushes, its colour harmonizing so well with them that he had not distinguished it until it moved, though it was within a few feet of him. In the foliage overhead howling monkeys kept up their resounding notes, and tree-frogs boomed and whistled incessantly. As evening drew on, the forest was filled with the continuous hum of multitudinous insects; owls hooted, goatsuckers flitted from bough to bough uttering their weird cry, and snakes uncoiled themselves from the branches on which they had taken their siesta. Will would have liked to spend days in studying these creatures of the forest.

Returning to the camp, he discussed with Ruggles what should be done when the cans were filled.

"It will be two days more before we have enough spirit," he said. "I think we should start from here in the early afternoon, run down to the narrows at half-speed, and try to rush them at dusk. No more night running for me. We might strike a snag again, and we can't risk it a second time."

"Couldn't we simply drift?" suggested Ruggles.

"Too risky--not from the river, but you may be sure that Espejo will watch it day and night. He will know we haven't got past him."

"You had better send Azito out to scout, then, before we start."

"A good idea. But I am sure we shall have to trust to our speed alone. We can't fight them with only two revolvers between us. Our only chance is to get to the narrows before we are seen, and then go at top speed. A quarter of an hour would do it."

On the second night thereafter the petrol tank was full, and there was a considerable quantity of spirit left over in one of the cans. Will ordered Azito to go out in the yacht as soon as it was light, and see if he could discover the movements of the enemy. While the Indian was absent the others prepared for the adventurous voyage. The two prisoners, who had sullenly watched the making of the benzine, were laid in the bottom of the hydroplane: Will and Ruggles thoroughly overhauled and oiled the engine, and cleaned the planes and the propeller of the weeds which had already begun to cling about them.

About nine o'clock Azito returned. His report was that he had seen a boat filled with armed men coming slowly up the stream, searching the creeks on either side. There were twelve men, all armed with rifles.

"We must get out before they come up here," said Will. "Otherwise we shall be like rats in a trap. How far are they down, Azito?"

"About three twists, señor."

This was not very enlightening. The Indian's "twist" may be of any length, according to circumstances. But Azito went on to explain that the enemy were not far below a creek that ran into the stream from the opposite side, which, as nearly as Will could recollect, was about half-a-mile from that up which the hydroplane had come. He had little doubt that if the enemy were proceeding systematically they would search the opposite creek first. Accordingly he ordered all on board. The yacht was left. Will promised it as a present to Azito when his work was over, having no doubt that Mr. Jackson would purchase it of De Mello. Then they poled the hydroplane down the creek until they came within a few yards of the point where it entered the stream. There they drew into the bank, where they could not be seen until the enemy came right opposite the mouth.

Many tall trees grew at the edge of the stream.

"Climb up, Azito," said Will, "and tell us when the boat enters the creek on the opposite side."

In a few minutes the Indian was snugly perched among the thick foliage at the top of one of the loftiest trees.

"We'll start as soon as we know they're in the creek," said Will to Ruggles. "That may give us time to get several miles down before we're discovered."

Several minutes passed. Then they saw Azito sliding down the tree with the agility of a monkey.

"They have gone into it, señor."

"Very well. Pole us out. It's neck or nothing, Ruggles. Have you got your

revolver handy?"

"Trust me. You'd better give me yours. You can't use it and steer too, and I'm rather a dab with my left hand."

"Here you are, then," said Will, smiling as he handed the weapon to him. "But I hope we shan't come to close enough quarters for you to use it. We're off, and good luck to us."

CHAPTER XV--HYDROPLANE *VERSUS* LOCOMOTIVE

Captain Espejo thought himself to be very hardly used. He had expected to be by this time Jefe of Guayana. That was the office promised him by General Carabaño in reward for his services in the "liberation" of Venezuela. The General had not kept his promise. That was a clear breach of faith. Nay more, so far was he from acting up to his self-assumed title of Liberator, that he himself needed liberating. That was most annoying. Really, he ought to have been more careful. His capture was a malign stroke of Fate, but since Fate was inaccessible, Captain Espejo vented his annoyance and disappointment on his subordinates, which did not improve matters.

Success is the best credential of a revolutionist, and the General's want of success bid fair to ruin his cause. There was no moral enthusiasm to buoy up the spirits of his men. Quite the contrary, indeed: the triumph of General Carabaño would be the triumph of corruption. The bonds linking them to him were of the slightest, and when with his disappearance their prospects of sharing the spoils of victory vanished into thin air, they began to ask themselves whether it was not time to disband. Perhaps in a few years another Liberator might arise who would not so easily be snuffed out. That was how the Venezuelans looked at the situation. The Indians of the force had already made up their minds that General Carabaño was a bladder, and betaken themselves to their own place.

Captain Espejo was worried as well as annoyed. Food was running short; the exchequer was empty; the men had not received the pay promised them; and the Captain was not at all happy at the prospect of having to deal with a mutiny.

He had declared, to be sure, with great vehemence, that the audacious kidnappers of the Liberator had not gone down-stream; he had no doubt that the detestable machine which had proved such a troublesome instrument in the hand of Fate had broken down, and the Englishman was hiding somewhere in the neighbourhood. But machines could be repaired, and when the repairs were made the Englishman would probably make another attempt to carry off his captive. If he could be intercepted all might yet be well. Captain Espejo used this argument to some effect with his men, and they had agreed to wait a week, and to keep a careful watch on the river meanwhile. The locomotive was kept constantly under steam, so that, immediately the discovery of the fugitives was signalled, the train might start for the junction. It could surely outstrip an overladen hydroplane, and then the Englishman might think himself lucky if he escaped a bullet through the head. It would give the Captain great pleasure to accompany the Liberator-General to his hacienda of Las Piedras, and witness the shooting of that impertinent engineer who had dared to flout him.

The Captain was ruminating thus when there fell upon his ear the report of two rifles, fired in quick succession. Springing up from the chair which the General had lately filled, he ran into the camp, summoned a hundred men from their *dolce far niente*, and with much excitement ordered them to board the three wagons coupled to the engine.

"They are discovered!" he cried. "We have them!"

He climbed into the cab beside the engine-driver.

"A thousand pesos," he shouted, "if you reach the junction before the Englishman!"

The driver opened the throttle, the wheels spun round, and when they held the rails the train started with a great rumbling and clanking towards the junction.

————

The hydroplane had floated only a few yards down the stream when there was a shout from the bank opposite. Looking round, Will saw, at the embouchure of the creek, a man wearing General Carabaño's green feather in his sombrero. He held a rifle. The enemy had clearly taken the precaution to post a look-out, so that while their boat was searching the creek, the hydroplane should not pass undiscovered.

One glance, then Will started the engine, and the hydroplane shot forward.

"Not too fast," said Ruggles anxiously.

"All right. Ten miles an hour till we see how she goes. Keep your eyes open, Azito."

The Indian grunted. He stood as far forward as was convenient, holding his pole, and fixing his eyes on the course. He meant to earn the little yacht that lay

snugly beached in the creek behind.

The man on the bank shouted again. In less than two minutes the hydroplane was level with him. He knelt on one knee, lifted his rifle, and fired.

"Through the wind-screen," said Will, not turning his head. "No harm done. I'll make it fifteen."

The hydroplane swept round the first "twist" in the stream, and passed from the sight of the look-out. Another shot rang out, and half-a-minute later two more.

"A waste of ammunition," said Will, smiling.

"Stop, señor!" cried Machado in terror, from his place in the bottom. "We shall all be killed. His Excellency will be shot."

"Hold your tongue," growled Ruggles, "or we'll set you and his Excellency up as targets."

From some spot down-stream came the crack of another rifle, and then a second. Half-a-minute later there seemed to be an echo from a point still lower, and Azito declared that he heard two more shots even farther away.

"They're signals," said Ruggles. "Confound 'em, why are they so careful?"

"I daren't go any faster yet," said Will. "The stream's too narrow. We shall get to the tributary directly, and then I'll make her go."

A few minutes brought them to the broader stream. Then Will opened the throttle further, increasing the speed to twenty miles an hour. More shots sounded faintly in several directions. Ruggles turned his head and glanced up-stream.

"There's a canoe after us," he cried. "Indians paddling like mad, and half-a-dozen fellows with rifles."

"They can't hurt us," said Will, and laughed as he heard the rattle of an ineffective volley behind.

"It'll be a near thing, though, if they've got other canoes waiting for us down-stream. Is she going all right?"

"Perfectly. Twenty-five now, and planes beautifully. They won't hit us unless they've had practice with partridges, and if they get in the way they'll come off no better than the jaguar I ran down."

The vessel was skimming along as lightly as a bird. Ruggles gripped the side; he had no experience of this kind of navigation.

"The canoe's out of sight," he said, looking round. "We're level with the hacienda now. Two shots again. They've put a chain of lookouts all down the river."

"Thirty," replied Will, his eyes fixed on Azito, his hands firmly gripping the steering-wheel.

"A canoe putting off from the bank, señor," cried Azito. "Four men in her."

"Right bank?"

"Yes, señor."

"We'll go straight at her. Revolver ready, Ruggles?"

"For goodness' sake be careful!" gasped Ruggles. "She may capsize us."

"Thirty-five," said Will.

On flew the hydroplane.

"Are we near the canoe, Azito?" asked Will.

"She goes back, señor: better get out of the way."

"Very sensible. Duck, Ruggles: they may send a shot at us."

Next moment four bullets whizzed overhead.

"A thousand pesos if you stop!" cried the General, terrified alike by the speed of the hydroplane and the risk of being shot by his own men.

"Not for a million," said Will. "Are we near the narrows, Azito?"

"Not yet, señor."

"By Jove!" exclaimed Ruggles, "they've sent the train after us. I can see smoke through the trees."

"Forty," said Will.

He had now attained the maximum speed. He had seldom ventured to keep it up for more than a quarter of an hour at a stretch, but he was grimly determined to beat the train. No engine had yet run over the newly-laid track at a greater speed than twenty-five miles an hour: surely the driver would not risk a smash. But Captain Espejo was at the man's elbow, continually urging him to go faster. The heavy wagons rattled on behind, the men swaying this way and that, shouting, peering through the trees to the left to catch a glimpse of the hydroplane.

The sun beat down fiercely. Hot though the air was, it blew cold upon the occupants of the hydroplane as she whizzed along. Will and Ruggles were bathed in perspiration. José was oiling the engine.

"How are we now?" asked Will.

"I can't see for the trees. Aren't we near the narrows?"

He was answered by a volley from the bank. He ducked instinctively. Will did not budge; his whole mind was given to the hydroplane. Would the engine stand the strain? He heard bullets slap into the wind-screen, and trembled lest one should strike the engine or find its way into the petrol tank.

"The train's almost level with us," said Ruggles. "Not more than a hundred yards behind."

At this point the railway track emerged upon the river, coming to within a quarter of a mile of it. Here the bank was clear of trees.

"How many trucks?" asked Will.

"Three, full of men. They're levelling rifles at us."

"Won't there be a smash when they come to the curve!"

"We're gaining a little, but they'll make up on us when we come to the bend."

"We must go faster. I can't leave the wheel. Ruggles, go to the exhaust valve and double the pressure."

"Good heavens! It won't stand it."

"It must! Hurry up, man."

Ruggles, as an expert mechanician, knew the risk involved. By adjusting the valve admitting pressure from the exhaust to the petrol tank it could show double the pressure on the tank gauge. By this means the explosive mixture would be enriched and more power gained. But there would be an immense risk of overheating the cylinders.

"I don't think----" he began.

"Quick! quick, man!" said Will.

Hesitating no longer, Ruggles did what was required of him. The hydroplane flew on. In half-a-minute it had gained a furlong on the train. Fearing that their prey was escaping them, the men on the trucks fired a volley, some resting their rifles on the sides, others even venturing to mount, being held up on the jolting vehicles by their comrades. More bullets struck the windscreen; Will did not notice that Azito's right arm dropped by his side. The Indian did not utter a sound.

With every second the hydroplane increased its lead. At last it came to the bend, which made its course longer by over a mile than the straight track of the railway. This was the critical part of the race. Will knew that, if the train maintained its speed, he could not expect to reach the farther end of the curve before his pursuers. It was impossible to increase the pressure by an ounce. His only hope was that the train would not have time to pull up, so that the men could steady themselves for firing, before he shot past.

As he rounded the bend into the straight again, he saw that the train was leading by about two hundred yards. It did not appear to be slackening speed. And here he recognized with a throb of delight that there was a point in his favour that had not occurred to him. For nearly a mile the bank of the river was lined with a thin fringe of trees. This explained the fact that the train had not pulled up. Even if the men could alight in time, the trees must completely spoil their chance of pouring in an effective volley. The hydroplane was skimming along at such an enormous speed that they could no more have taken good aim at it through the trees than if they had been park palings. In half-a-minute the hydroplane was once more forging ahead. A scattered volley flashed from the trucks; Will paid no heed to it; he did not even notice that a bullet had flown up from the wind-screen and struck his cheek. All that he knew was that the hydroplane was drawing away, and that in another mile or so the train would arrive at a dangerous curve.

"They're putting on more steam," cried Ruggles, "and coaling like the very dickens."

"Shall we do it? I can't keep this up for more than another minute."

"In another minute they'll come to the curve in the cutting," said Ruggles, "and then nothing can save them if they don't slacken."

A few seconds later a loud grinding shriek came from the right.

"They've clapped on the brakes," said Will. "'Twas time. Reduce the pressure, Ruggles, or the whole concern will burst up. There's no hurry now."

[image]

THE RACE TO THE SWIFT

Ruggles screwed back the valve. Will gradually closed the throttle until the speed was reduced to twenty miles an hour. The bridge was in sight. Just as they reached it there came a crash from the line. Will reduced the speed still further, and looked round. The driver had put on his brakes too late. Rounding the curve, the engine had left the rails and the wagons were overturned.

"Not much harm done," said Ruggles. "Lucky she slowed down when she did, or there'd have been a horrible mess."

"Thank goodness we've got through in time," said Will, mopping his steaming brow. "We can take it easy now, and get to Bolivar before it's dark."

CHAPTER XVI--THE END OF A REVOLUTION

The hydroplane was now on the broad bosom of the Orinoco, floating down with the tide. Will thought it time to stop for a meal.

"We'll run into the bank, and Azito can cook us some yuca," he said.

"A glass of beer, just one, would satisfy me," said Ruggles. "But, bless us! you've got blood on your cheek."

"So I have!" cried Will, brushing his hand over it. "Any one else hurt?"

There was no answer, but looking round, he noticed that Azito's right arm hung limp at his side. As soon as the vessel was beached, he examined the wound.

"You're a plucky fellow," he said. "Do you know that your arm's broken?"

"It's nothing, señor," replied the Indian simply.

"Isn't it? We'll see what the surgeon says when we get to Bolivar. Ruggles, you can do most things: can you make a bandage?"

"I've washed and dressed a week-old baby," said Ruggles, "and there's a bit of bandaging in that."

"Well, see what you can do for Azito. José must bake our bread, and I think we might release our prisoners now, don't you?"

"You won't let the General go, surely?" said Ruggles.

"Not I. But we can untie him now. He must be pretty uncomfortable."

The two prisoners were released from their bonds. They looked very woe-begone. Machado began to protest.

"You said no harm should come to me if I did your bidding, señor," he said. "This is how an Englishman keeps his word!"

"You haven't much to complain of," said Will bluntly. "Many a man would have shot you for your treachery."

"But you will not take me to Ciudad Bolivar?" said the man, beginning to whine. "They will shoot me there."

"And you would deserve it. But since it was by your help that I secured the person of your General, I'll see what I can do for you. Perhaps they won't trouble about you when they have the arch-rebel in their hands."

Then General Carabaño thought it time to say a word.

"You have no right to meddle in the affairs of Venezuela, señor," he said. "My cause is a good one: I have half the country at my back: and----"

"We won't go into that, General," interrupted Will. "You ventured to meddle with the servants of a Company protected by the laws of your State. You have got the worst of it, and that's all there is to be said."

"Not all, señor," said the General, changing his tone. "You forget that your friends are still in captivity, and be sure that if any harm befall me, my adherents will exact retribution."

"I doubt whether you have any adherents now," replied Will. "At any rate you will go with us to Ciudad Bolivar."

"If you release me, señor, I will undertake that your friends shall rejoin you in three days, and your Company shall be no further molested."

"Sorry I can't oblige you, General. You can't repay my Company for their loss of business: you can't repair the railway line that your adherents have smashed up. The less said the better, I think."

The General glared at him, but seeing that there was no hope of his relenting

he held his peace.

After a meal, Will started the hydroplane, and ran down the river at a speed of about fifteen knots.

"What about the Chief and Jerry O'Connor?" said Ruggles, sitting at his side.

"I'm rather bothered about them," replied Will, "though it wouldn't do to let the General think so. They're out of reach, and we can't get at them easily. But I hope they won't come to any harm. It is quite clear we can do nothing at present. We can't go across country while Espejo and his crew are still at large. Perhaps the Government will do something for them in return for our capture of Carabaño: that's my hope."

Suddenly there was a loud splash. Looking round, Will saw that the General had flung himself overboard. No doubt he expected to meet the fate of rebels when he came into the President's hands, and preferred to seek his own death. Will instantly stopped the engine and sprang into the river. For a few moments the General did not reappear, and Will feared that he had gone to the bottom; but swimming along, he caught sight of the woolly head emerging a few yards away, and three or four swift strokes brought them together. The General fought stubbornly until Will in desperation called Ruggles to his assistance. Between them they managed to haul their prisoner to the vessel, by which time he was almost unconscious. Again his hands and feet were bound, and Will set the engine going at a higher speed.

It was near dusk when they came in sight of the white cathedral tower of Ciudad Bolivar. Soon after they entered the narrow part of the river. There was the row of black rocks rising out of the water near the right bank. There was the Piedra del Medio--the large rock rearing itself in the middle of the stream. And there at last was the stone quay, not deserted, as it had been at his last visit to the city, but now thronged with idlers watching the progress of the strange vessel about which their curiosity had long been unsatisfied.

Will steered the hydroplane alongside the quay, and sprang out. Ruggles untied the bonds about the General's feet, and together they lifted him on to the quay. The onlookers were at first silent in sheer amazement; then the cry arose that the rebel General had been brought a prisoner to the city. Each taking an arm, Will and Ruggles marched the General along the Calle de Coco.

"What about Machado?" said Ruggles a few seconds after they had started.

"We'll let him go," answered Will. "I fancy he has had a lesson. He'll keep out of the way of the authorities, and after what has happened he'll beware of the rebels. Perhaps he'll try to earn an honest living."

Followed along the street by an ever-growing crowd, mocking and jeering at the General, they came at length to the Town Hall. The Jefe was beyond measure amazed and delighted when he saw his prisoner.

"The President shall hear of this at once, señor," he said, shaking Will warmly by the hand. "It is you, señor, that are the Liberator of Venezuela, and your name will be honoured in the annals of my country. You must tell me at leisure how you succeeded in capturing this notorious enemy of the State. I will at once issue invitations for a banquet."

"Pardon me, Excellency; as you perceive, I am not presentable."

The rough life of the past few days and his immersion had indeed given him a disreputable appearance.

"That is a trifle, señor," said the Jefe. "My own tailor shall provide you with garments within an hour or two. The whole city will be eager to hear your story, and I cannot be denied."

Will accepted his fate philosophically. The General was put into safe quarters in the city jail: a telegram was immediately sent to the President at Caracas, telling him the news and asking for instructions: and then the Jefe himself took Will to his tailor's, and gave orders that he should be becomingly arrayed. He would have done the same for Ruggles; but that worthy, at the first mention of a banquet, had quietly slipped away. He told Will next day that he couldn't trust himself at such a festivity.

"You see, they wouldn't have beer," he said, "and wine would bowl me over in no time. Besides, their champagne is filthy stuff."

There is no need to relate what happened at the Jefe's hospitable table. Will was the hero of the hour, and supremely uncomfortable. It was very late before the party broke up, and it is a regrettable fact that the Jefe, when he took Will home as his guest for the night, talked a great deal of nonsense.

"Ah!" said Ruggles, when Will hinted at this next day, "there's nothing keeps a man so safe as having two pounds a week and no more."

In the morning an order came from the President that General Carabaño should be immediately sent to Caracas. He gave at the same time a cordial invitation to Señor Pentelow to visit him. This Will promptly and gratefully declined by telegraph. He had had a conversation with the Jefe. It appeared that a few days before, scouts had reported that Colonel Orellana's force had broken up. No doubt news of General Carabaño's abduction had reached them, and they recognized that the revolution had fizzled out. Being relieved of further anxiety on this score, the Jefe readily acceded to Will's request that he would send a small force by steamer up the Orinoco, in order to effect the release of the prisoners. General Carabaño's hacienda was about a hundred miles from the junction, and remote from the railway. It could best be reached by ascending the tributary until it ceased to be navigable, a few miles beyond De Mello's hacienda, and then by riding across country. The journey would be too hazardous for Will and Ruggles to attempt alone while Captain Espejo still had any force at command; but a small

party under Colonel Blanco could no doubt easily dispose of them, and then the way would be open.

Accordingly a steamer left Bolivar at ten o'clock, carrying Colonel Blanco and fifty well-armed men, together with the two Englishmen and their native helpers. Will had not forgotten to have Azito's arm properly attended to by a surgeon, nor to buy a good supply of petrol. The hydroplane was towed. With some difficulty Will had persuaded the doctor to accompany the expedition in order to assist the men who had been injured when the train was thrown off the rails. The doctor was doubtful of getting his fees.

At the junction Colonel Blanco disembarked with Will and some of his officers to view the scene of the smash. Engine and trucks lay, of course, where they had fallen, with broken rifles and other evidences of the catastrophe. Steaming along the river again, they came to a halt where there was no longer sufficient draught for the vessel, and marched over the few miles to the hacienda. Here they found all the rooms occupied by a score of injured men, attended only by Indians. They had been brought in a few hours before, after a terrible night in the woods. Captain Espejo was one of the most seriously injured, as was only to be expected from his perilous position on the cab of the engine. All the men who were able to ride had decamped. Colonel Blanco was much interested in seeing the hole in the stable wall by which Will had escaped, and the room where General Carabaño was captured.

Next morning Will and Ruggles set off on horseback with a dozen of the Colonel's men, under Azito's guidance, for the General's hacienda. It was a long and fatiguing journey, through woods, across streams, now on bare rock, now in swamp whose squelching ground covered the horses' fetlocks. When they arrived at the precipice where Ruggles had escaped, nothing would satisfy him but to halt and scratch his initials on the cliff.

"Just like a tripper," said Will, laughing.

"Well, as your name is to be written in full in the State records, you won't grudge me my simple initials on the rock," replied Ruggles. "And I shouldn't wonder if they last longer."

They had ridden but a few miles farther when Azito pointed to the right, and declared that he had seen three horsemen coming towards them. Nobody else could distinguish the figures. Colonel Blanco decided to halt in a clump of trees until the strangers came up. Will thought they might bring news of the prisoners, or that two of them might be the prisoners themselves; but Azito said they were coming from the wrong direction.

In twenty minutes the three riders came clearly into view. Then Will saw that one of them was Antonio de Mello. The others were strangers to him. He went out to meet them.

"Hallo, old chap!" said De Mello. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm going to pay a visit to General Carabaño's hacienda."

De Mello laughed.

"What is this I hear about the Liberator?" he said. "My Indians--I have had spies at my place all along--told me that he was abducted in the middle of the night. Is it true?"

"Perfectly," said Will. "Your place is just now a hospital."

"What! Has there been a fight?" asked De Mello, grimacing.

"No: a smash on the line. I suppose you are on your way there?"

"Yes. With Carabaño gone I thought I might venture back to my own, and two friends accompanied me to see fair play." He introduced the strangers. "But why are you going to the General's house?"

"To release a couple of friends of mine. Didn't your Indian tell you what happened to us?"

"They told me a great deal that I didn't believe. What's the truth of the matter?"

"It's a long story, and if you don't mind I'll keep it till I get back. Colonel Blanco is waiting in the wood yonder, and we want to get to Las Piedras before night."

"Colonel Blanco! The revolution is broken, then?"

"Smashed."

"That's good news. I hope they haven't damaged my stables."

"No, your stables are all right," said Will with a laugh, wondering at his friend's strange lack of patriotism. "No Englishman," he thought, "would think first of his stables." Was he right?

Having been introduced to Colonel Blanco, De Mello rode on with his friends towards his hacienda. The others resumed their journey in the opposite direction.

It was getting dark when they reached General Carabaño's estate. The house was lit up. Passing the window of the dining-room, and looking in, they saw the Chief and O'Connor seated at table with half-a-dozen Venezuelans. They were talking cheerfully, and seemed to be in the best of spirits. Hearing the jingle of bridles, the whole party started up and came to the window. The Venezuelans looked alarmed.

"How are you, Chief?" Will called through the window.

"It's the boy!" cried Mr. Jackson. "It's all right, O'Connor. Come in, Pentelow; you'll find the door open. Who've you got with you?"

"Colonel Blanco, of the State army."

He entered the house with Ruggles and the Colonel.

"You don't look much like prisoners," said Will, laughing.

"Prisoners? We're gentlemen at large. We've heard all about it. A messenger came up the day after the General disappeared, and we guessed you were at the bottom of it. These gentlemen here offered to escort us to Bolivar, but it's two hundred miles and a trying journey; and as we're living on the fat of the land and having a better time than we've had for months, we decided to stay here until we got word of you."

"But I don't understand," said Will. "Aren't these gentlemen revolutionists?"

"No longer, my boy. They threw over the General at once, and are now the loyalest citizens of the Republic. That's revolution in Venezuela."

Colonel Blanco was chatting very amiably to the Venezuelans. It was all very amazing to Will, whose knowledge of the revolutions of history included recollections of bitter enmity, murderous passions, proscriptions, massacres.

He told the whole story, to which his friends listened with as much amusement as surprise. O'Connor sighed because he had not been with Will in the race with the train, but the Chief looked grave when he heard of the smash on the line.

"We'll get no compensation," he said. "However, all's well that ends well. We shall no doubt get the line finished before the next revolution."

Next day they all returned to railhead. Already the scattered peons were flocking back, and in the course of a week work was in full swing again.

When De Mello heard all that had happened he was inclined to be envious of Will. It occurred to him apparently for the first time that he had played a rather sorry part in deserting his hacienda, and leaving to strangers the task of making head against the rebels. In course of time, perhaps, men of his class, who at present look on matters of State with indifference, will learn to take an interest in them, and develop a patriotism which will raise their country to its fitting rank among the nations of the world.

A fortnight after his return to the camp, Mr. Jackson was informed by his new telegraphist, an Englishman, that General Carabaño had not been shot, the President having commuted his sentence to permanent exile. Will received an autograph letter from the President thanking him for the great services he had rendered to the Republic, and some weeks later the secretary of the Company in London cabled to the effect that the Board of Directors had unanimously resolved to grant him an honorarium of a hundred pounds in consideration of his zeal for their interests. His hydroplane became the talk of the country, and an enterprising Yankee in Bolivar organized weekly trips by steamer to the scene of his adventures for the benefit of curious sightseers, and incidentally for his own.

Of all the actors in this little drama, Azito was perhaps the best satisfied at its conclusion. In De Mello's yacht, purchased for him by Mr. Jackson, he often sailed on the creeks and streams in the neighbourhood. His wants were simple and few, and he earned the little that sufficed to supply them by occasional attendance upon

the señor who had saved him from the jaws of a jaguar, and whose hydroplane was only second in his estimation to his own yacht.

THE END

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